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HOW AFRICA MADE MODERNISM:
AFRICAN ART AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation brings art history together with literary studies to show that African art has been an engine of—and not simply a passive inspiration for—modernist and contemporary literature. Although the relationship between African art and modernism has long been remarked, conventional histories often describe African craft as an inanimate source for the lively innovations of early twentieth-century Europeans. In the late twentieth century, this story continues: post-Independence African writing is often characterized as a belated inheritor of colonial modernism. This dissertation corrects both of these tendencies by expanding the debate across space, time, and media. It begins by considering the responses of British modernists Roger Fry and D.H. Lawrence to African art's global circulation with that of their West African contemporary, J.E. Casely Hayford. The second chapter turns to the work of Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Léopold Sédar Senghor to argue for the importance of an African-influenced sculptural aesthetic in both the African-American and francophone African worlds. The third chapter examines the work of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka to show that their engagements with African art challenge received ideas about a modernist-postcolonial

divide in literature. This dissertation's fourth chapter pairs two contemporary writers: the experimental, postmodern South African author Zoë Wicomb and the realist Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Both authors share investment in the artisanal that extends to a general concern with materiality—in particular the materiality of books, and writing itself—that recasts the conventional understanding of Wicomb as paradigmatically postmodern and of Adichie as paradigmatically realist. It is the concept of creativity—of making—that ultimately emerges as the unifying idea from both the artistic and literary works that this dissertation examines. This dissertation shows that African artists, in direct and indirect ways, helped to create modernism across several continents.

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Introduction

It is the second decade of the twentieth century. A young intellectual writes a profoundly ambitious and formally experimental narrative. The narrative includes a description of an artifact of West African material culture, what would soon more easily be termed an object of African art. The artifact (or art object) addressed in this narrative is not where it belongs; it is not performing its designated social function. It has been removed from its original milieu, geographically and culturally, by the forces of British imperialism. The writer knows this, but he nonetheless imagines that the object retains aesthetic power and cultural significance in its new location. In fact, this art object becomes something of an allegory for the author's desires for the larger written work he is creating.

The story of this early twentieth-century author who responds in writing to a piece of African visual culture, whose circulation is set in motion by the fact of Europe's "Scramble for Africa" in the late -nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, could be that of D.H. Lawrence as he drafts the passages in *Women in Love* (1920) that lavish attention on a West African carving. It could also, with slight modifications, easily be the story of any number of European and American modernist authors and artists whose appropriations of African visual art are widely read through the lens of primitivism: Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, Jacob Epstein, Amadeo Modigliani, and Alberto Giacometti to name only a few. The anecdote above, however, is also the story of a thinker who is not likely to spring to mind if we understand the verbal representation of African visual art at the beginning of the twentieth century to be wholly founded on, and explicable through, the concept of primitivist appropriation: the great Pan-Africanist

activist and intellectual, J.E. Casely Hayford. Hayford's narrative of the stolen Golden Stool of Ashanti provides both a contemporary and indigenously African written response to the circulation and appropriation of African material culture at the beginning of the modernist era, and an imagined itinerary for the circulation of the book in which Hayford's narrative is contained, *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911).

As a Black African thinker discussing art and material culture through the medium of print in 1911, Hayford bridges two oppositions that structure, and frequently inhibit, scholarly conversations about the relationship between the arts of sub-Saharan Africa and anglophone literature of the twentieth century. The first of these is the division between Africa and "the North," the latter of which we might understand as Europe and the United States. The second is the division between image and word, the visual and the written. Too often, these oppositions have been mapped onto one another: Africa is seen as producing visual raw materials which European writers interpret in their art criticism or creatively appropriate as the object of ekphrastic fiction or poetry. The opposition between word and image functions on a second, institutional level, between the discipline of literary studies and the disciplines of art history or anthropology. The instance of Hayford easily troubles both the verbal-visual and European-African axes, but it is a fundamental principle of this dissertation that it is even more important to challenge these binaries where they appear most natural or accurate, as in commonly told stories about African artworks as passive objects of modernist appropriation, or as stories of postcolonial African writers as belated inheritors of European modernist innovation. It is in fact only by thinking simultaneously about the visual and the literary that Africa's role in the cultural production of modernity can be understood.

That African art influenced European visual art in some way during the twentieth century is broadly agreed upon, and debates about the degree and kind of this relationship remain highly relevant to this project. This dissertation argues above all, however, that African art and material culture played a crucial role in the creation of global modernist *literature*. This is a considerably less well-explored connection than the relationship between African and European visual art, but it is a connection with far-reaching implications for the extent of Africa's influence on global culture on both literary and artistic levels. This dissertation takes as its topic the verbal treatment of African visual art because Africa's place in the history of modernism has frequently been limited, first, to a single medium, the visual, and second, to a single story of inspiration through appropriation. In that story, Europeans such as Picasso or Modigliani are the agents, and African art the inanimate objects of their creativity. Looking at the literary representation of African art across the twentieth century, however, reveals that African as well as European writers used African sculpture, crafts, and aesthetic objects to question and cross the borders between the visual and the literary. Hayford inaugurates a century-spanning tradition of literary claims for the importance and modernity of African visual production. This alternative story of an expanded global modernism, in which African art is a defining contributor, as opposed to a victim of high modernist formalism, runs across the work of Alain Locke through Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka to recent fiction by Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Adichie. It even allows us to re-evaluate the writing on African art of British modernists such as D.H. Lawrence and Roger Fry.

Presenting African visual art as an engine of literary and visual modernism, this project recasts the relationship between modernist literary studies and postcolonial

scholarship on African literature. Its attention to the history of art in Africa brings to modernist studies an engagement with African culture that, despite the field's growing interest in transnational approaches, has remained insufficient. At the same time, this dissertation emphasizes the crucial but overlooked role of visual culture in African literature. I show that the realm of the visual arts, far from being simply a zone of objectification and misappropriation, was also a powerful source of cultural recovery and political resistance for African writers, and remains so today. By including colonial-era African writing from the early twentieth century, I demonstrate that some African and African diaspora writers participated in and critically responded to the global uptake of African art. Reading this colonial-era work alongside British modernism allows for a fuller understanding of the diversity of modernist innovation at the beginning of the century, showing that the African literary encounter with modernism was not a belated, strictly postcolonial phenomenon.

“How Africa Made Modernism” engages the concept of modernism in two ways. First, it refers to the influential role of African art on modernism in the conventional sense of early-twentieth-century experimental art and literature. Second, it asserts Africa's centrality in current debates in which the definition of modernism is unstable and expanding, sometimes overlapping with the postcolonial or anglophone categories in which authors addressed in the second half of this dissertation are typically located. On the first level, it is important to identify the precise strain of modernism to which African art most strongly contributed. It is not the modernism of Bergsonian temporal flows, of stream-of-consciousness, or of themes of alienation and decadence (the modernist qualities which African fiction from the second half of the twentieth century is often seen

as taking up belatedly). It is rather the kind of modernism that is invested in art objects, in works in their singularity, the modernism that sees these works as evidence of a kind of creative production that overlaps with artisanal craft. This is modernism that enacts the “test of production” that Douglas Mao identifies as the difference between modernism and its decadent roots, a test that places a high value on the materiality of “solid objects.”¹ It is the modernism of the Omega workshop, of the jar in Tennessee and the red wheelbarrow. Bill Brown’s description of this aspect of modernist aesthetics is helpful here: “[The] effort to fathom the concrete, and to imagine the work of art as a different mode of mimesis—not one that serves to represent a thing, but one that seeks to attain the status of a thing—is a fundamental strain of modernism, as characteristic of Stein as it is of Malevich, of Picasso as it is of Zukofsky. The question of things becomes a question about whether the literary object should be understood as the object that literature represents or the object that literature has as its aim, the object that literature is.”²

The connection that Brown identifies between physical and literary objects is crucial for understanding African art’s role in twentieth-century literature. As we will see, there is a century-long, transnational practice of writing about African art objects in ways that figure the larger contours of literary objects. The figure of the material book is often the means of imaginatively mediating between the art object and the literary object—this interest in physical books will be seen in nearly all of the work discussed in this dissertation, from Hayford and Locke to Achebe and Wicomb. If one of the problems with the modernist treatment of African art is its tendency to objectify or fetishize decontextualized artifacts of material culture, a central reason that this project nonetheless works within a modernist frame is that the terms of modernist aesthetics

provide the vocabulary for a surprisingly affirmative narrative of African art's far-reaching power. For modernist critics such as Fry and Locke, for example, the art of sub-Saharan Africa represented three-dimensionality in the utmost. To describe these most "sculptural" of sculptures they used the phrase "plastic form," by which they meant sculpture at its furthest remove from bas-relief, from the flatness of painting.³ Like Joseph Frank's related concept of "spatial form" in literature, the idea of plastic form has long had a reputation as an example of modernist aesthetic autonomy at its most old-fashioned.⁴ Despite this, we will see throughout the texts addressed that the decontextualized art object in motion receives a literary treatment that imputes to them a kind of reparative autonomy, in which the art object stands not as lost fragment of its original social totality but as a kind of microcosm of it—a relationship that is often as much one of modernist metaphor as of realist metonymy, even in the substantially realist fictions of Achebe and Adichie.

The encounter with the African art object contributes to the development of modernist literature in ways that persist in the writing of African authors in the postcolonial era. In addition to examining visual-verbal and African-European binaries, then, this dissertation's topic provides a way of confronting that never-quite-parallel binary between modernist and postcolonial literature. Recognizing this pattern across the twentieth century and across African and Euro-American literature thus tends to support the expansion of the category of modernism with regard to Africa, both geographically to include earlier African writers such as Hayford and temporally to include writers who are usually considered through a combination of postmodern and postcolonial lenses.⁵ This dissertation argues that this expansion is worth adopting because it undoes the

assumptions of belatedness that attend scholarship on African art and literature's relationship to modernism and even to modernity itself. Asking what kind of definition of modernism would accommodate African culture's responses to modernity contributes to the longstanding postcolonial goal of "provincializing Europe."⁶ Asserting the founding contributions of African makers to global modernism, meanwhile, militates against the models of belatedness that reproduce the pernicious evolutionary timelines that Johannes Fabian has influentially called "the denial of coevalness."⁷ There are, however, important reasons in the intellectual history of African literary studies that explain why making a connection between Africa and modernism faces resistance.

The relationship between African and modernist literary studies might be described as one of cool distance punctuated by occasional heated conflict. Conventional histories of European and American modernism's relation to the arts and literatures of sub-Saharan Africa leaves little question as to why this is. Pablo Picasso's "discovery" of African art at the Palais du Trocadéro stands to this day as an emblematic narrative of appropriation, a cultural imperialism inextricable from Africa's violent colonization. Joseph Conrad's location of the Congo as the site of modernist horror in *Heart of Darkness* remains a flashpoint as well, thanks in part to Chinua Achebe's powerful and well-known critique of Conrad's treatment of race. Among scholars, critic Charles Larson's narrative of "the emergence of African fiction"⁸ led to Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike's denunciation of "Larsony" as the practice of holding African letters to a falsely universalist standard of modernization. Alongside the pathology of "Larsony," these three critics posited "Hopkins disease" in assaulting the use of modernist poetic

aesthetics on the part of some Nigerian poets, scorning what they call “the Leavisite modernist trinity—Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.”⁹

The critical response to Charles Larson’s work in particular illustrates both the legitimate causes of the postcolonial Africanist criticism of modernism and the diminishing relevance of this stance with regard to how modernist studies is practiced in the academy today. Larson’s book, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1971), no doubt earns the condemnation of Chinweizu and his colleagues by defining African literature’s emergence as an evolution from indigenous forms toward a kind of “universality” whose Eurocentrism is veiled thinly if at all. Larson proclaims the African novel’s move into “the main stream of Western tradition,” in which “[s]ituational plots are ... replaced by works which concentrate on character individuality,” “[d]escription, and treatment of time and space [become] more typically Western” and “[e]xperimentation tends now toward Western techniques which replace the traditional conscious or subconscious incorporation of oral literary materials into the text.”¹⁰ Newton P. Stallknecht’s foreword to the book puts an even finer point on Larson’s Eurocentric evolutionism, glossing African literature’s “emergence” as “a confused yet persistent expansion of world-view and of self-knowledge that has accompanied the passage from a naive, oral tradition to a literature capable of absorbing the influence of such writers as Franz Kafka and James Joyce.”¹¹ Larson and Stallknecht position African literature as belated and peripheral—in the words of Eileen Julien, “satellite literature of the literatures to the north.”¹²

It is not surprising that opposition to “Larsony” has become a cornerstone of Africanist criticism: it well should be. The extent to which the kind of Eurocentric criticism practiced by Larson is coterminous with or caused by modernism, is, however,

in serious need of revision. This is especially true in light of the reconstitution of modernist studies since the turn of the twenty-first century. As we have seen, Larson's criteria for advanced literary achievement include experimentation, cosmopolitanism, universality, and an individualistic, interiority-directed approach to character development. This set of aesthetic criteria represents one legacy of canonical modernism, to be sure, but it can no longer be said to reflect a complete definition of modernism even in the most narrowly European and American understanding of the field. Against the idea that the progress toward greater and greater interiority is the hallmark of modernist literature, recent scholarship has clarified modernism's profound engagement with mass culture, collectivities, social networks, affects, material objects, and nonhuman animals to name just a few categories that stand in contrast with individual, psychological interiority. That is not even to consider the transnational expansion of modernist studies toward greater inclusion of works from the global south.¹³ The inclusiveness of this turn to "global" modernism can of course look homogenizing, condescending, and Eurocentric; there is more to be said on these problems later. The point for now is that the chasm between African literature and modernist studies persists despite a substantial revision of modernist studies' definition and scope. At the same time, though, the relative dearth of writing on sub-Saharan literature from within the new modernist camp suggests that new modernist studies' transnational expansion has, for better or worse, not extended to Africa.

Simon Gikandi's influential work represents an important exception to this division. Since his book *Writing in Limbo* (1992), Gikandi has elucidated various intersections between modernism and African and African diaspora art and literature.

Taken together, his two most recent statements on the subject combine a trenchant explication of why it is difficult to reconcile modernism and African literature with a commitment to some of the principles that ultimately serve to exacerbate the problem. In “Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism,” Gikandi argues that “in the process of being institutionalized, the moment of modernism also valorizes older, familiar, racial economies.”¹⁴ He builds on this rather familiar understanding of modernism and race to draw out its distinct implications for modernism’s relationship to both art and literature. “[N]otions of primitivism,” he argues, “either explore the influence of African art objects on the works of modern painters and sculptures (which is often the case in art history) or focus on the African American body as the supplement for the African (which is the case in literary studies).”¹⁵ Gikandi is quite correctly dissatisfied with both of these frameworks (and his identification of the tension between bodies and objects is one I will return to later). His solution is to call for a new reading that, against the “notions of alterity that are already embedded in the high modernist norm,” analyzes “the limits of the difference modernism celebrated.”¹⁶

It is difficult to see how this approach can lead far beyond a continued historicist investigation of European primitivism and its errors. The reason for this is Gikandi’s definition of modernism as a fundamentally European phenomenon, a definition that is underlined in his recent article on early twentieth-century African literature, “Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History.” If Gikandi, in his discussion of Picasso, adheres to the idea that Africa’s influence on European visual arts was the result of passive appropriation, his analysis of African print literature in the same period positions African writers squarely on the receiving end of European influence. For

Gikandi, anglophone African writers of Hayford's generation such as Solomon Plaatje and Thomas Mofolo must be read within the constraints of what was available to them as European sources—"the King James Bible, William Shakespeare, John Bunyan, and Marie Corelli."¹⁷ He argues that "colonized writers, always limited by their conditions of production as citizens and subjects, had no choice but to deploy inherited forms toward their own goals."¹⁸ Because "neither realism nor modernism was available to these writers a aesthetic strategies or even as cultural movements," according to Gikandi, these writers worked mainly with the genre of the romance.¹⁹

These claims are true, as far as they go, and they clearly grow out of a desire to historicize—and provincialize—modernism as a specific European phenomenon. At the same time, though, these pieces imply a narrative of African belatedness and marginality. Gikandi offers a vision of modernism in which the artworks appropriated by European painters are simply objects of theft and misunderstanding, and yet at the same time early twentieth-century African literature can only be understood in terms of European examples that can be shown to have influenced it. This model stands in sharp contrast the paratactic and comparative approach called for by Susan Stanford Friedman, who is an important exponent of new turns in modernist studies. She argues that appropriation and theft are only two of many ways of describing what she calls "interculturalism. "The appropriation model in particular regards the modernists of the West as cosmopolitan producers of culture who cite or steal the traditions of the Rest to break, out of the repressive, clichéd, or narrow representational conventions of the West," she argues. "Whether used in praise or critique of the West's modernism, the appropriation model recapitulates the logic of imperialism."²⁰ Friedman convincingly suggests that concepts

of inheritance, influence, and appropriation are too limiting. They frame inquiry in ways that pre-establish center and margin, innovator and follower—and they seem to do with particular force with regard to African culture. In elevating methods of collage, juxtaposition, and parataxis, Friedman opens up the possibility for readings that are not hamstrung by implicit temporalities of evolutionary development.

Friedman's openness extends beyond a multiplicity of artistic modernisms to allow for multiple modernities across world history. To be sure, this can run the risk of stretching definitions beyond any usefulness, and the model may be vulnerable, in spite of itself, to the risk of reproducing the homogenizing force of globalization in its planetary scope. There is no doubt that such concerns as these with new, expansive modernist approaches explains some of the resistance to modernist studies among Africanists. I am not interested here in debating Friedman's model in its entirety, but in endorsing and building on her smaller and in my view less debatable assertions about the inadequacy of appropriation and influence for conceptualizing intercultural traffic. The possibility that there are multiple modernities and modernisms is not to be rejected out of hand, but Fredric Jameson's "singular modernity" provides a useful temporal frame for helping us to see African art and literature as coeval with work from the global north.²¹ Modernity here means, in effect, global capitalism. This definition has the virtue of separating the term from connotations of advancement and innovation. Ian Baucom offers a helpful formulation: "modernity is not a thing but a system, a system of connections and active disconnections, of accumulation and exploitation, of development and abjection."²² Modernity brings about radical economic inequality on a world scale, but no one is more or less modern for coming from a particular place on the globe.

A single historical modernity does not necessarily imply a single literary modernism, but it is worth thinking about how much the concept of modernism would have to be revised, and in how anti-Eurocentric a fashion, to adequately account for creative production on such a scale. The single modernity model may in fact allow for more openness toward non-European modernism, while making the concept of literary modernism more vulnerable to redefinition based on the full diversity of art and literature generated by global modernity's emergence. As Neil Lazarus points out, "[Jameson's] formulation stands as a compelling repudiation of the various recent attempts to pluralize the concept of modernity through the evocation of 'alternative,' 'divergent,' 'competing,' or 'retroactive' modernity/modernities. Inasmuch as these invariably derive from an initial assumption as to the 'Western' provenance of modernity—rather than situating it in the context of *capitalism as a world system*—they are both unnecessary and misguided."²³ Taking the full measure of cultural production under global modernity, as Lazarus usefully suggests, cannot be achieved by working from a narrow definition of modernism as a particular set of European aesthetic practices as the standard by which other work is defined. To be colonized by the forces of global capital, as sub-Saharan Africa was, is a fundamentally modern experience. Models of literary modernism that position African writing's relationship to modernism as marginal and belated serve only to mirror and perpetuate the myth of "development" on the economic and political level.

The more recent of the only two book-length studies that explicitly focus on African literature's relationship to modernism, Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations*, strongly endorses the Jamesonian "singular modernity" approach. A strict Hegelian Marxist, Brown "reconstellates modernism and African literature in such a way as to

make them both comprehensible within a single framework.”²⁴ In a departure from the usual way of framing discussions about Africa and modernism, Brown convincingly points out that “every discussion that isolates a ‘modernist tradition’ or an ‘African tradition’ ... carries with it an inherent falseness.”²⁵ Brown positions himself in part against the earlier book on Africa and modernism, David I. Ker’s *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition*, which traces lines of influence between British modernists and postcolonial African writers. Ker concludes that African literature revises European modernism by emphasizing communal values over individualism.²⁶ Whatever the merits of this particular claim, its very framing excludes the possibility of modernism’s being shaped by African forces in the first place. Brown’s method, which focuses on form in British works and social content in African texts, also reproduces a troublingly symmetrical relation between Africa and the North. This dissertation’s focus on the visual arts cuts across this too-symmetrical division by looking at the representations of African art objects wherever they are to be found. That they can be found on the many different sides of twentieth-century literary studies’ internal dividing lines—British and African, modernist and postcolonial— speaks to the underappreciated centrality of these works and of the cultural locations of which they are both metonyms and microcosms.

Of course, the vastness—and possible vagueness—of a topic so capacious as “African art” poses an obvious difficulty for any project that would seek to address it in its entirety. While this dissertation cannot escape this problem, it should be clear that this problem is very frequently this dissertation’s topic: the question of how writers in different times and places negotiate the relationship between the literary and the visual with regard to the arts of Africa will have serious implications for how we understand

visuality and textuality across the sub-disciplinary lines that currently divide twentieth-century literary studies. Defining African art as a category is a dangerous endeavor, but it is useful for our purposes to lay some groundwork via one expert's list of what African art is *not*. In an essay on the "enduring myths" surrounding African art, Suzanne Preston Blier enumerates some common misconceptions.²⁷ Four of the myths Blier identifies are closely related: the idea that African art is geographically "bound by ... carefully circumscribed regions, as if objects and styles did not travel over time and space" (27); the myth of African as communitarian and small-scale (28); the myth that it is produced strictly along "tribal lines" (29); and the myth, especially prevalent in European museums, that African art exhibits should be organized around anthropological groupings (31). Although this dissertation will generally work with conventional geographic and ethnic subgroupings of African art, such as "Yoruba art" or "Igbo carving," it will pay attention to the different ways in which these categories are constituted by the writers and artists under consideration. (The separation of sub-Saharan Africa from the north of the continent is one of the problematic implications of the geographic divisions Blier mentions,²⁸ but this project will limit its scope primarily to the visual traditions of Western and Southern Africa, broad enough categories for this dissertation's purposes.)

If the above-mentioned of Blier's myths offer important caveats, her other three "myths of African art" overlap with several of the fundamental cruxes of this dissertation—and point to problems that my intermedial and transnational approach to African art and literature will help to solve. The first of these is "the myth of primal, timeless Africa," the tendency to see African art "as existing outside the realm of real time" (26). The second is "the myth of intuitive African art," in which "little is said

about real artists who grapple with the history of art forms in their own region and with the arts of other, foreign, peoples as well” (30). Blier’s discussion of this problem is worth quoting further: “Abstract works by European artists [are seen as] part of a larger formal and intellectual history of artistic discovery and invention; abstract works by African artists, while acknowledged to be visually powerful remain the product of naïve or untrained individuals who are seen a priori, to lack any real understanding of what they are doing as abstractionists” (30). The final myth, especially crucial with regard to the intersection of Africa, Europe, and modernism, is that of the supposed opposition between “‘art for art’s sake’ and ‘primitive’ art” (30). “It is often said or assumed that works produced by African sculptors are ‘art’ because they have been elevated to that position by ‘us,’” Blier argues, in a departure from some postmodern or postcolonial approaches to Africa’s relationship to modernism (30). Against the idea that African art is strictly functional and European art completely autonomous, Blier reminds us that “[if] we were to envisage an exhibition of European art that was entirely devoid of arts having functional associations (religious, political, monetary, or psychological), it would be a very small exhibition indeed” (41). Whatever claims of total artistic autonomy some European modernists may have occasionally made, European modernism of course grew out of its social surround, a context of which Africa was a part. African and European creativity cannot be separated on the grounds of a false dichotomy between the aesthetic and the social.

This false dichotomy comes from the apocryphal narrative in which African art enters the world by being “discovered” by Pablo Picasso and other European artists, who, as soon as they encounter these art objects, evacuate them of all history and context by

turning them to their own formalist purposes.²⁹ In her history of the collection of African material culture in British museums during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Annie E. Coombes has shown that “attributing aesthetic value to material culture from the colonies was not something confined to, or initiated by, modernist artists working in Britain, France or Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century.”³⁰

This pre-modernist interest in African material culture, however, was more anthropological than formal; Coombes illustrates how exhibits at the British Museum and other institutions contributed to the “categorization and racialization of the African continent occupied an important place in both the scientific and the popular imaginations of late Victorian and Edwardian England.”³¹ Although exhibits of African material culture during this era were mobilized toward a variety of political ends (imperialist, religious, abolitionist), they were united by efforts to locate African cultures in an evolutionary chain of being. This evolutionary and *vertical* logic, in which objects of material culture are aggressively contextualized as specimens of anthropological and (pseudo)scientific inquiry, is the backdrop for the high modernist response to African sculpture’s “plastic form.” Remembering this history when considering the modernist celebration of this sculpture’s three-dimensionality, this dissertation will show, should change the way we view the politics of this aesthetic response to African carving. When Roger Fry and Alain Locke express the desire for a kind of spectatorship in which the viewer circumambulates an African art object in the museum space, they are not simply fetishizing the art object. They are finding in African sculpture an aesthetic of the spatial, the horizontal, and the synchronous that works against evolutionary hierarchies. That they fail to do so in a way that completely escapes the evolutionist and racist

vocabulary of their time should not obscure the ways in which their criticism provides a contemporary record of African art's profound influence in the early twentieth century. The aesthetic toward which Fry and Locke work will be built on and revised by Achebe, Soyinka, Wicomb, and Adichie.

The connection between the sculptural and the synchronous means that Africa's role in modernism cannot be entirely reduced to or explained through the phenomenon of primitivism. To be sure, figures such as Fry and Lawrence harbored primitivist and indeed racist beliefs about Africans, and the frameworks of primitivism, as well as anti-primitivist revisionism, must be outlined even though I will argue that neither framework leaves sufficient room for the creative agency of African makers. Robert Goldwater's 1938 definition of primitivism in modern art provides both a useful sketch of the concept and an important example of an approach to non-Western art that would deservedly come in for strong criticism later in the twentieth century.³² Primitivism is in part a turn on the part of disaffected Western artists towards the cultures of people from the global South, but as Goldwater and other scholars of primitivism explain, the object of primitivist desires can also be intra-European—children, peasants, the working class. Goldwater could be seen as moving from describing primitivism to engaging in it when he proceeds to treat primitivist source material as so much raw material for European (and generally male) artistic geniuses; he makes the troubling claim that there exists an “extreme scarcity of the direct influence of primitive art forms.”³³ Goldwater's approach influenced modernist curatorial practices for decades, at least as late as the Museum of Modern Art's controversial 1984 exhibit “*Primitivism*” in 20th-Century Art. This exhibit, which consisted of pairings between European and American art works with their non-Western

counterparts attracted a great deal of criticism, especially for its curator William Rubin's insistence on evaluating these non-Western works strictly according to his own standards of supposedly universal aesthetic value. The exhibit features prominently in some of the important postmodern and postcolonial responses to modernist primitivism to which we will now turn.

At the end of the 1980s, two significant interdisciplinary studies critiqued the opposition of the primitive and the civilized across the museum world and popular culture: *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989) by Sally Price³⁴ and Marianna Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive* (1990).³⁵ Price's work is especially strong in its Marxist cultural studies-influenced analysis of the role of primitivism in supporting the market for non-Western art and artifacts, while Torgovnick combines the insights of postcolonialism and critical race studies with feminist analysis to expose the myriad problems at work in representations of "the primitive" in literature, art, film, and television. "Primitive Art collecting is based on the Western principle that 'the world is ours,'" Price writes, explicitly connecting this collecting impulse to modernist aesthetics, which she understands as the "distillation into a context-free aesthetic essence," and pointing out that decontextualization is explicitly celebrated in many advertisements for art from Africa and other parts of the global south.³⁶ Torgovnick, for her part, covers a wide range of primitivism, including a great deal about African art, including the responses to it by Roger Fry and D.H. Lawrence, which are also considered in the first chapter of this dissertation. Torgovnick deconstructs the inconsistencies in their statements and assumptions about African cultures. The problems with primitivism that Price, Torgovnick, and others identify are very real, and the work that they have done in

exposing them is to be remembered in any discussion of the conjunction of modernism and Africa. This project will depart, however, from some aspects of this postmodern anti-primitivist revisionism for two reasons. First, as the instance of Hayford shows, there are non-European narratives of African art's global travels that exist outside concepts of the primitive. Torgovnick, in particular, seems uninterested in defining alternative models that would allow for cross-cultural learning that respects the context of non-Western people and works. Second, anti-primitivism ultimately serves to reproduce a primitive-civilized binary by ascribing extraordinary power to Western appropriators and positioning non-Western artists and thinkers as passive victims in need of a heroic critic's interventions. A synchronic reading of Fry, Lawrence, and Hayford will further elucidate some of these problems in Chapter One.

In his influential work *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), James Clifford offers a similarly critical take on William Rubin's 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibit, underlining modernism's "taste for appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own mage, for discovering universal, ahistorical 'human' capacities."³⁷ Unlike Torgovnick and Price, however, he has a rather less censorious take on the conjunction of modernism, anthropology, and African art during the early twentieth century. In the work of such figures as Michel Leiris, Clifford identifies a moment of possibility that he terms "ethnographic surrealism," an "aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious."³⁸ Clifford's less Manichean perspective on the traffic between African and European art during the high modernist era opens up room for agency on the

part of African makers while maintaining a critical vantage on the power dynamics at work. It is past time, however, to question Clifford's intently postmodern vocabulary, his conviction that irony, play, and performance are the obvious answers to the problems of politics and aesthetics. This dissertation seeks to take seriously the overlooked but persistent modernist investment in the work as opposed to the text, in totality over fragmentation, that attends the tradition of anglophone writing about African art in the modern era.

Another influential book from the same moment places African art at the intersection of modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism in a different way: Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*.³⁹ Appiah discusses a 1987 exhibit Center for African Art in New York entitled *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, which involved a variety of writers selecting and responding to particular items from the Center's collections. Appiah approves of James Baldwin's selection of a Yoruba man with a bicycle, an image of dynamic hybridity.⁴⁰ For Appiah, however, the "post-" in postcolonial is famously not the "post-" in postmodern. Postcolonialism "challenges earlier legitimating narratives ... in the name of the ethical universal, in the name of humanism, ... And on that ground it is not an ally for Western postmodernism but an agonist, from which ... postmodernism may have something to learn."⁴¹ There will be more to say about postmodernism and postcolonialism in their relationship to African art in the final chapter of this dissertation, but Appiah goes on to add an easily missed turn in his argument, in which he offers non-literary "African cultural productivity," visual culture included, as "an antidote to the dark vision of the postcolonial novelist."⁴² Appiah is correct that work surrounding the postcolonial African novel is unduly negative in tone

and that a turn toward literature's relationship to other forms of expressive culture would provide a fuller sense of the reach and strength of the creativity that flourishes in sub-Saharan Africa. The blame lies, however, not in any particular negative vision on the part of novelists, but in widespread tendencies to talk about African literature as pieces of evidence rather than as products of creativity—a tendency that we cannot transcend as long as we hold on to the reflexive abjection of modernism within African studies.

Evan Mwangi is among the few literary critics to have recently addressed African visual culture's relationship to postcolonial fiction, which he does as part of an important book on African metafiction in its relationship to gender and sexuality.⁴³ Mwangi focuses on painting in work of Yvonne Vera, Bessie Head, Nuruddin Farah, and Zakes Mda among others. He argues that what he calls “painted metaphors” achieve “the deployment of visual artistic media as a figural terrain through which the metafictional novel subverts established gender norms.”⁴⁴ Mwangi emphasizes painting over sculpture because it works against the fixing of African art in an “authentic” past, in part because it less associated with “tradition” than sculpture. Although this dissertation will consider the place of painting in the work of Soyinka and Wicomb, unlike Mwangi it will emphasize sculptural practice in part to interrogate the very questions of tradition and modernity, and, on the formal level, of fixity and stasis, that Mwangi identifies. Mwangi's attention to metafiction, to how African literature self-consciously theorizes its own status as work or text, breaks ground in acknowledging the creative agency of African writers and artists. This is ground that the current project seeks to build on with regard to earlier African literature as well as the contemporary works on which Mwangi focuses.

One of the key terms at work in my effort to trace the influence of African art on twentieth-century literature is ekphrasis, which James Heffernan defines broadly as “the verbal representation of visual representation.”⁴⁵ The model of ekphrasis in the context of this topic may tend to associate the verbal with European subjects and the visual with objectified African artists and artworks, but we will find throughout the ekphrases under consideration that these binaries are frequently upset or recast. The tendency of ekphrasis in prose to slow or stop the narrative trajectory, to emphasize the spatial over the temporal, represents in microcosm a larger strain of modernist investment in the art object. Passages of ekphrastic representation thus become, not just episodes in a novel, but a way of pointing toward the novel’s own status as a work (and sometimes, by extension, a material book). One way to look at this connection between the literary object and the art object is through Joseph Frank’s classic concept of spatial form: “[Modernist] writers ideally intend the reader to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence.”⁴⁶ Spatial form imagines a conjunction in which “[p]ast and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition.”⁴⁷

This aesthetics of stasis and synchrony calls up the very aspects of modernism that are often considered the most inimical to the dynamism and social embeddedness of African art, but this dissertation shows that it is precisely at the level of spatial or plastic form that the agency of African makers is most apparent. Agency, broadly understood as the ability of a person or thing to produce effects, is another key term of this dissertation—and its counterintuitive relationship to the verbal and visual intersections of

ekphrasis stands at the crux of this project. Wendy Laura Belcher has recently outlined the history of agency as a concept in African studies, noting that “social science models have been limited by a discomfort with the power of the colonized subject to affect the colonizer.”⁴⁸ The dominant model of agency with regard to African art and modernism, as discussed above, is what Belcher calls the appropriation model, “in which one culture is understood as appropriating aspects of others’ cultures to construct the self and repress the other. In this model, agency is always in the hands of the appropriator, most infamously while appropriating the cultural expressions of the other’s resistance.”⁴⁹ Moving beyond this model toward seeing the influence of African art outside of its original context does not mean denying the violence and power imbalances that instigated its global circulation. On the level of method, re-evaluating the agency of African art sometimes means reading for the influences of particular objects even when they are not necessarily functioning as intended and even in the absence of their particular provenance or the name of their individual creator. As we will see in Chapter One, this way of reading non-human agency brings us into direct conversation both with indigenous African animist philosophies and literary studies’ emerging relationship to new or vital materialisms.

For Rita Felski, agency is to be applied to individual art works as an alternative to a determinist focus on context. This definition of nonhuman agency leads us to a sensitive topic in the study of African art: the relation between artifact and context, between part and whole. “Context is often wielded in punitive fashion to deprive the artwork of agency, to evacuate it of influence or impact, rendering it a puny, enfeebled, impoverished thing,” Felski argues.⁵⁰ This questioning of the primacy of context is

especially controversial with regard to African art, a body of work defined in many ways by decontextualization at its most violent. Context is no less central with regard to African literature; Felski's model is a far cry from Christopher Miller's "any non-African reader (or even an African reader from a different culture area) seeking to cross the information gap between himself or herself and an African text will very probably be obliged to look in books that are classified as anthropology."⁵¹ This dissertation will follow the authors it considers by thinking dialectically about these two extremes. While supplemental reading in anthropology is surely never a bad idea, we will see that literary texts can contain anthropological knowledge and that they can do so through representing semi-autonomous art objects as catalysts for learning about cultural contexts. Even to call African artifacts art objects, as this dissertation generally does, is to court charges of exacerbating imperialist categories of knowledge, but I mean to emphasize the capaciousness and instability of the category over time and space. The main subject of inquiry under consideration here is the how writing about African art reveals that art's influence on global modernist literature. Their key attributes in this regard, and the names under which they are categorized, may differ from their most important qualities and functions in more local contexts. Research efforts on local and global scales are equally important, but it is the urgent priority of this project that the burgeoning conversation about global modernist literature begin to more fully include African influences.

I begin to set in motion these questions of agency, contexts, and objects in my first chapter, "African Art, Agency, and the Emergence of Modernism." I illustrate how the British modernists D.H. Lawrence and Roger Fry, as well as their West African contemporary, J.E. Casely Hayford, write about African art objects as things that exercise

agency as they circulate internationally. Fry's art criticism and Lawrence's *Women in Love* both contain self-critical depictions of European spectators' encounters with African sculpture. Rather than portraying these sculptures as passive objects, Lawrence and Fry use tropes and syntax that attributes agency to them. During the same era, on the Gold Coast in present-day Ghana, Hayford was expanding the definition of African art to include books. In *Ethiopia Unbound*—an experimental hybrid of fiction, polemic, and prophecy that I define as modernist—he produces a work that anticipates and allegorizes its own transnational circulation. At the same time, it provides a contemporary response to the imperial removal and recirculation of traditional African art objects, specifically the Golden Stool of the Ashanti kingdom.

The second chapter, "Crafting Diaspora: Sculptural Affiliations in Locke, Hughes, and Senghor," argues that African art served as a medium for the creation of diasporic connections between Africa and the United States in the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Léopold Sédar Senghor each engage the formalist responses of Fry and Lawrence to African art in ways that treat African sculptural forms as imaginative grounds for political commitments. The chapter also re-evaluates some controversial poems from two parts of the diaspora, putting poems by the early "primitivist" Hughes alongside work by the Senegalese *négritude* poet Senghor. All three thinkers write about West African sculpture in ways that figure the forging of diasporic connections as an act of creative making. That they do so by working with and contributing to modernist aesthetics illustrates that the overlap between modernism and African diaspora writing is not reducible to models of primitivist appropriation.

My third chapter, “African Modernism In and Out of the Museum: Achebe, Soyinka, and the Visual Arts,” examines fiction, drama, and criticism by two major figures of Nigerian literature, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. While the first two chapters of the project demonstrate that African art was not a passive object of modernist literature, this chapter shows how this re-definition of modernism changes received ideas about a modernist-postcolonial divide in literature. This divide can be seen either as a historical break, in which modernism gives way to the postcolonial at mid-century, or as a divide between radically opposed scholarly orientations and reading methods. In examining Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, and both authors’ critical work on the visual arts, I show that Achebe and Soyinka imagine Igbo and Yoruba art objects as bearing a reparative autonomy as they circulate beyond their original contexts. On the one hand, both of these authors can be seen as imaginatively removing the art objects from the museum of modernism and restoring the it to its social context, but this does not entail a rejection of modernist aesthetics: Achebe and Soyinka both make use of the aesthetics of sculptural self-containment as a primary means of figuring social totality.

My fourth chapter, “The Artisanal Turn in African Fiction,” pairs two contemporary writers: the experimental, postmodern South African author Zoë Wicomb and the realist Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Both of these major figures of twenty-first century world Anglophone literature, despite their sharply different formal approaches, write frequently about African visual arts. This chapter argues that the representation of art in the works of both authors indicates a pervasive, and modernist, concern with artisanal craft in both writers’ oeuvres. This investment in the artisanal

extends to a general concern with materiality—in particular the materiality of books, and writing itself—that recasts the conventional understanding of Wicomb as paradigmatically postmodern and of Adichie as paradigmatically realist. In my readings of Adichie’s novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Wicomb’s short story collection *The One That Got Away*, I argue that both authors must be understood in light of their committed interest in extra-linguistic artistic and artisanal creative production. I invoke the artisanal here to expand the terrain of creativity in a way that includes the work of craft and the aesthetics of autonomy in a non-oppositional and non-hierarchical relationship. It is the concept of creativity—of making—that ultimately emerges as the unifying idea from both the artistic and literary works that my dissertation examines. Against assumptions of marginality and belatedness, this dissertation locates African artistic and literary production at the center of global modernism, where it has been from the beginning.

¹ Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

² Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

³ See Christopher Green, “Roger Fry’s Canon – From African Sculpture to Maurice Vlaminck,” in *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry’s Vision of Art* ed. Christopher Green

(London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999), 135-212, 136. I will introduce the concept further in Chapter One.

⁴ Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963).

⁵ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies," *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 737-748.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

⁸ Charles R. Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1972 [revised edition]).

⁹ Chinweizu, Onwuchenkwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization*

of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics (London, Boston, Melbourne, and Henley: KPI, 1980), 172.

¹⁰ Larson, 277, 279.

¹¹ Newton P. Stallknecht, "Foreword," in Charles R. Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction*, x.

¹² Eileen Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992), 3.

¹³ For major works putting modernist studies in conversation with postcolonial studies and general questions of global modernity, see, among many others, Jessica Berman, *Modernism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Edward S. Cutler, *Recovering the New: Transatlantic Roots of Modernism* (Hanover: University of New Hampshire Press; University Press of New England, 2003); Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel quel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2004); Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Simon Gikandi, "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism," *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* ed. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 31-50,

33.

¹⁵ Ibid, 33.

¹⁶ Ibid, 37.

¹⁷ Simon Gikandi, "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History," *MLQ*, 74:3 (2012): 309-328, 312.

¹⁸ Ibid, 311

¹⁹ Ibid, 320.

²⁰ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies," *modernism/modernity*, 17:3 (2010): 471-499, 483.

²¹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).

²² Ian Baucom, "Township Modernism," *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* ed. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 227-244, 237.

²³ Neil Lazarus, "Modernism and African Literature," *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* ed. Mark Wollaeger with Matt Eatough (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP 2012), 228- 245, 233. In the same volume, see also Sarah L. Lincoln, "'Petro-Magic Realism': Ben Okri's Inflationary Modernism," 249-266.

²⁴ Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3.

²⁵ Ibid, 3.

²⁶ David I. Ker, *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition* (New York: P. Lang, 1997).

²⁷ Suzanne Preston Blier, "Enduring Myths of African Art," *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. Curated by Tom Phillips. (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996), 26-32.

²⁸ On this problem see Ekpo Eyo, "Putting Northern Africa Back in to Africa," in *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, 9-14.

²⁹ An important claim for how this dynamic work in modernist literature, via Picasso and Gertrude Stein, see Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³⁰ Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 5.

³¹ Ibid, 214.

³² Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).

³³ Ibid, xxi.

³⁴ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³⁵ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). For a range of perspectives that both support and challenge Torgovnick's approach, see Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

³⁶ Price, 79, 90, 99.

³⁷ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century, Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 193.

³⁸ Ibid, 118.

³⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴⁰ Ibid, 148.

⁴¹ Ibid, 155.

⁴² Ibid, 157.

⁴³ Evan Mwangi, *Africa Writes Back to Self*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2009.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 65.

⁴⁵ James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3. See also W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre*, 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁸ Wendy Laura Belcher, "Consuming Subjects: Theorizing New Models of Agency for Literary Criticism in African Studies," *Comparative Literature Studies* 56.2 (2009): 213-232, 213.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 217.

⁵⁰ Rita Felski, "'Context Stinks!'," *NLH* 42 (2011): 573-591, 582.

⁵¹ Christopher L. Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 4.

African Art, Agency, and the Emergence of Modernism

“It is art.”¹

So states D.H. Lawrence’s Rupert Birkin with reference to an African statuette in *Women in Love* (1920). Birkin is having a debate with Gerald Crich about this figure, one of a group of West African carvings, which depicts a pregnant African woman. These works are in the home of Halliday, an artist whose collection also contains paintings from the Futurist movement. The juxtaposition underlines that this moment in the novel stands as a literary counterpart to the introduction of African material culture into Western aesthetics as *art* rather than *artifact*. While Conrad portrays Central African textiles and ivory carvings in *Heart of Darkness* as mysterious metonymies for Africa,² Lawrence’s more extensive ekphrastic descriptions reflects on the European appropriation of African objects as *objets d’art*. This aestheticization of non-Western material culture is of course a defining gesture of modernism’s primitivist strain.

The locus classicus of this development in the visual arts is Pablo Picasso’s *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), which depicts five women, two of whose faces resemble West African masks.³ Picasso was among the Continental painters whom Roger Fry introduced to Britain at his explosive 1910 exhibit at London’s Grafton Gallery, “Manet and the Post-Impressionists.” The debate between Crich and Birkin suggests the kinds of controversy that greeted Picasso’s painting. Although *Women in Love* was published ten years after Fry’s exhibit, it is nonetheless one of the earliest examples of African art objects being treated ekphrastically in British modernist literature.

The disruptive force of Lawrence’s ekphrasis, the break in the novel that it causes, highlights at least two crucial tensions—between Europe and Africa, and between visual

and literary art. For twentieth-century literary studies, these tensions remain as important as ever. The efforts of the “new modernist studies” critics who seek to expand our understanding of modernism both temporally and spatially, with an emphasis on non-Western modernisms, invites readings of transcultural textual moments such as Lawrence’s African ekphrasis. To assert the value of asking about transnational or cross-cultural moments in literature is hardly at this point a controversial claim. I contend, however, that delivering on the promise of these suggestive questions requires us to look less exclusively at literature and to consider its relationship to other media. This is particularly true in considering parts of the world in which print culture has played a somewhat less prominent role than in the West, such as sub-Saharan Africa, which is the region of focus for this project. While there is an abundance of work on African art’s shaping influence on Western art, there has been minimal scholarly consideration of African art’s relationship to twentieth-century literature. I argue that twentieth-century anglophone literature, Anglo-American and African, can in fact not be fully understood without studying the influence of African visual art.

This project aims to provide such a study. Furthermore, it seeks to do so in a way that does not limit itself to the Africa/Europe or visual/literary binaries that I have just briefly sketched. As Susan Stanford Friedman argues in her call for a truly global modernist studies, “Models of planetary cultural traffic, mimesis, and translation need to supplant older concepts of modernist internationalism, which are typically based on binaries of Self-Other, modern-traditional, civilized-savage, high art-primitive art.”⁴ While I have begun with some of these binaries for the purpose of introducing the topic of Africa’s contribution to global modernism, a contribution that arguably has been

defined more rigidly by these boundaries than any other, I have raised these divisions in order to begin the process of replacing them. Accordingly, this project will consider the place of African visual art and material culture in anglophone writing not just from Britain and the United States, but, to a substantial degree, from Africa itself. The project thus contributes to current critical conversations about the relationship between modernist and postcolonial studies, but it holds itself aloof from even this relationship by refusing to strictly align the Anglo-American with the modernist and the African with the postcolonial.

Toward this end, this chapter will consider *Women in Love* alongside *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), a work by an African contemporary of Lawrence's, J.E. Casely Hayford, a writer and activist of Fanti origin from the Gold Coast (a British colony in present-day Ghana). This pairing is meant to break away from the genealogical method that characterizes most of the research that has been done on African literature and modernism. One important work on this subject, David I. Ker's *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition* (1997), focuses on tracing the influences of European writers on later African writers. While this model accounts for both anti-colonial politics and indigenous creativity to the extent that it reads African literature as "writing back" to the metropole, this reading is a limited one, and it positions African writing as intractably belated. This chapter favors juxtaposition over genealogy. Such a juxtaposition takes seriously Friedman's risky call for a method based on parataxis and collage, toward achieving what she calls "a non-hierarchical act of comparison, a joining that illuminates both commensurabilities and incommensurabilities."⁵ The risk here is that of the groundless comparison, of capricious free association. The hierarchies that Friedman

writes against, however, are so strongly ingrained in the study of African literature that it is a greater risk not to try a new critical framework. Friedman's ideas about parataxis and collage imply that, to fully reconsider the history (and present) of modernism, we need to risk dispensing with some strictures of historicism as narrowly construed. D.H. Lawrence and J.E. Casely Hayford are not from the same country or same artistic school, and they probably did not read each other's work. There is nonetheless potential value in reading them as part of what Isobel Hofmeyr, in her groundbreaking study of the circulation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in sub-Saharan Africa, calls "one integrated field."⁶

This project understands modernism in the broadest terms possible: as an artistic response to modernity. That Africa and its diasporas play a key role in the development of modernity has been established by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which is notable for its subtle critique of essentialism, what Gilroy terms "anti-anti-essentialism," and its emphasis on "routes" over "roots."⁷ Gilroy's suspicion of "roots," however, often seems to imply an elision of the role of Africa in his model. Indeed, for some of Gilroy's readers, the unclear place of "Africa" itself in *The Black Atlantic* represents a troubling indeterminacy, if not a dismissive disavowal. Simon Gikandi has noted in Gilroy's work "some uneasiness" on Gilroy's part "with the haunting shadow of Africa in the making of modern culture."⁸ More recently, as part of a collective research effort to "re-chart" the Black Atlantic, Oyekan Owomoyela argues that Gilroy's approach involves a "severely restricted opening to Africa" that has been reproduced in many Gilroy-influenced transatlantic or diaspora approaches to African studies.⁹ Indeed, it seems that Gilroy's work has if anything exacerbated the marginalization of sub-Saharan Africa's material contributions to modernity, a marginalization that manifests within literary studies in the

assumption that African literature stands in a belated relationship to innovations from other parts of the world.

An explicitly political rationale for including African literature within modernist studies comes from another recent exponent of transnational or global approaches to African literature, Nicholas Brown, who describes his work as “reconstellat[ing] modernism and African literature in such a way as to make them both comprehensible within a single framework.”¹⁰ For Brown, African and European literatures of the twentieth century must be considered together because “the single culture of global capitalism...has more or less ruthlessly subsumed what was once a genuinely multicultural globe.”¹¹ Brown’s point is powerful: authors as ostensibly unrelated to one another as Lawrence and Hayford are related by the economic and cultural ties wrought by global capital. A focus narrowed to national literatures, even when the nations are African ones and the motivation is a respect for the local, may obscure the crucial consequences of imperialism. Like most scholars working in African literary studies, I share Brown’s broadly Marxian view of the history of imperialism in Africa. I do not, however, share his strictly Marxist critical approach. For one thing, although I do not deny the extent of capitalist incursion into all parts of the world, the assumption that we live in what Brown terms a “monoculture” creates too great a risk of blindness to non-Western responses to modernity, whether we understand modernity as singular or plural, and even granting that an excessive investment in “difference” at the expense of material concerns has been a significant pitfall of multiculturalism. Furthermore, my interest in the intersection of literature with visual and material culture calls for a more open approach to the politics of form than Brown’s model allows. I am interested in different kinds of

production on different levels—the meanings that texts themselves produce as well as their representations of production, be that carving, writing, building, or direct political action. To this end, I am mindful of Raymond Williams’s call for “look[ing] at our actual productive activities without assuming in advance that only some of them are material.”¹² The space of overlap between literary and material production that my project opens up will allow for an expansive, and insistently affirmative, exploration of materiality in many sense of the term, and its relationship to creativity in particular.

This project’s affirmative stance toward art raises another political issue that must be addressed at the outset. While this project is deeply committed to re-evaluating and asserting the importance of the arts of sub-Saharan Africa in twentieth-century literature, I argue that it is sometimes necessary to refrain from accusing non-African representations of this artwork of politically nefarious appropriation. This is not because Western primitivists such as Picasso and Lawrence do *not* appropriate non-Western works—of course they do—nor is it to downplay whatever racist ideologies they harbored. It is on the contrary to leave room for the possibility that the relationship of appropriation is actually one of influence, conscious or otherwise on the part of the appropriator.¹³ Beyond this, it is to go some way toward shifting the focus from particular authors and artists altogether in favor of reading for what kinds of meaning are made by particular conjunctures themselves, especially when read against an expansively transnational backdrop. Refining our knowledge of what African art meant to D.H. Lawrence is to some extent less important than thinking about what kinds of meanings are made by this particular combination of the written and the visual. Do the anonymous artists whose carvings Lawrence first encountered in the collections of his associates in

the mid-1910s have any sort of agency to be traced in Lawrence's writing? Can they be read as making meanings beyond what the novel may appear to intend?

These questions may not lead to concretely satisfying answers, but they must be asked if we are to be open to the full potential of Africa's extraordinary artistic heritage. We need an approach that has absorbed the lessons of postcolonial criticisms of primitivist appropriation, but that moves beyond its focus on scolding the appropriators. Indeed, some well-intentioned postcolonial critiques tend to backfire in terms of their anti-ethnocentric aims. Marianna Torgovnick's influential *Gone Primitive* (1991) provides a ready example.¹⁴ I will discuss some of her specific comments about Fry and Lawrence below, but at this point I will suggest more generally that I seek an alternative to a model in which the critic harshly judges artists from the past by present standards, in such a way that positions the critic front and center as the heroic protector of the non-Western victim.

African art has without doubt been subject to appropriation and misapprehension—indeed, its initial arrival in the West occurred mainly through outright colonial theft—but this does not mean it cannot or should not be learned from and written about. As Caroline Rooney has suggested, hesitation to violate the radical alterity of non-Western production can also have the effect of precluding discussion of non-Western creativity. Against what she calls a “recurrent dismissal of the ‘creative subject,’” Rooney reminds us, in language that is highly suggestive for my subject matter, that “while there is not an author that precedes the literary text ... there is also obviously no authorless text, and that the text is throughout the weaving of the being of an author.”¹⁵ That the “authors” of African visual art are frequently anonymous (in ways that often imply a kind

of collective authorship nicely expressed through the metaphor of weaving) only underscores how closely knit the formal and the political implications of this study of African creative arts and literature will be.

None of this, however, is to deny that the initial reception of African art in Britain was discussed largely in formalist terms, and according to then-prevailing assumptions on African primitiveness or “savagery.” But as this chapter will argue, there is more than just ignorant appropriation occurring at the moment of modernist primitivism, both in Europe and Africa. In the following discussion of Fry, Lawrence, and Hayford, I will assert the active centrality of African art at this historical conjuncture. By juxtaposing Fry and Lawrence with Hayford, a colonial African writer who is not widely read, and who is never read in the context of modernist studies, I will further argue that the role of African art takes different forms in the early twentieth century. This challenges the narrative that African art’s role at the birth of the modernism was that of passive fodder for primitivist appropriators. When it appears in literature—be it in Fry’s art criticism, Lawrence’s novel, or Hayford’s multi-generic volume—African art exerts power that manifests itself even in texts that cannot successfully represent it, even in texts by authors whose knowledge of the works is limited or biased.

This chapter will focus specifically on how careful attention to African art objects revises our understanding of the concept of agency. Agency is emerging as a central concept of the “new materialism,” which I will discuss below, but it is also at issue in older, canonical criticism on Western modernism. Joseph Frank described modernism as the dominant artistic approach of “a culture whose creations more and more tend to deny or negate some essential aspect of the human agency at their source and to escape from

its control.”¹⁶ The texts discussed below all portray cultural creations in ways that resonate with Frank’s emphasis on non-human agencies, but challenge the Eurocentric view that these other agencies are simply signs of cultural decline. In fact, I align this project with current work on agency that radically re-imagine how agency is distributed across human and nonhuman actors. Following on Bruno Latour’s work on actor-network theory, Rita Felski has recently asserted that works of art, along with any number of other objects and beings, can be nonhuman actors, bearers of agency: “The Latourian model of the nonhuman actor ... includes not only individual novels or films, but also characters, plot devices, cinematography, literary styles, and other formal devices that travel beyond the boundaries of their home texts to attract allies, generate attachments, trigger translations, and inspire copies, spin-offs, and clones.”¹⁷ Felski does not ascribe conscious intentions to nonhuman actors, but defines an actor simply as “anything that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference.”¹⁸ This expanded community of possible actors allows us to “circumvent ... polarities of subject and object.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, Anne Anlin Cheng has recently made similar arguments with specific reference to primitivist modernism. Objects of primitivist appropriation, she writes, “even in their most isolated and reified state, can not only affect how they are looked at but also revise the modality of display aimed to capture them.”²⁰ For Cheng, appropriated objects such as African works “might embody agency or life” and have the power to catalyze “a vertiginous renegotiation of subjecthood and objecthood.”²¹

In what follows I will claim for African art objects, real and imagined, the kind of agency that Felski and Cheng suggest nonhuman actors can possess. In particular, I will read for moments in which art objects upset the subject/object dichotomy, a binary that

often seems to be most strongly in force when visual and material culture are represented in language. In the first half of this chapter, I will show how careful attention to the language used by Fry and Lawrence reveals that these two “primitivists” wrote about African art in ways that sometimes accord to it more possible agency than do the late twentieth-century critiques of primitivism exemplified by Torgovnick. In the second half of the chapter, I will argue that Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound* asserts agency for African cultural production in ways that both blur the boundaries between the material and the literary and expand the boundaries of modernism in the early twentieth century.

I. Recovering African Art’s Agency in Fry and Lawrence

Roger Fry’s essays on African art represent a key moment in its European modernist reception. In a 1910 article in *The Burlington Magazine* entitled “The Art of the Bushmen,” Fry puts forth some of the concepts that would define modernist primitivism (and subject it to withering criticism later in the twentieth century).²² In considering cave paintings by “Bushman,” as the San people of South Africa were then called by the British, Fry proceeds from then-prevalent assumptions that the English represented the height of civilization, while the San were “the lowest of savages” and “the least civilizable” (61). In a clear example of the Western primitivist idea of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny, Fry writes, “The primitive drawing of our own race is singularly like that of children” (56). In other words, Fry sees, both in the development of the individual person and the development of a culture, a progression in art from language-like symbols to realistic representation, although it is that realism that Fry’s modernist aesthetic wishes to move beyond. Fry, however, finds that the San cave artwork confounds his expectations in that they are highly stylized; “Nothing could be

more unlike primitive art than some of these scenes,” he writes (58). Fry’s essay does not completely resolve the paradoxical nature of its claims; it declines to acknowledge that the anomalous stylization of the cave art might, within Fry’s own terms, call into question the idea that the San’s work is simply an artifact of primitiveness.

The tensions within Fry’s perspectives on African art become more pronounced in a 1920 article in *Athenaeum* entitled “Negro Sculpture.” Here, Fry adopts a decidedly ironic tone in discussing the challenge to Western conventional aesthetics posed by an exhibit of African carvings at the Chelsea Book Club: “What a right little, tight little, round little world it was when Greece was the only source of culture, when Greek art, even in Roman copies, was the only indisputable art, except for some Renaissance repetitions!” (65). Fry speculates wryly on the prospect of how Samuel Johnson would have reacted to the market value of African “idols” before going on to say that “it seems unfair to be forced to admit that certain nameless savages have possessed this power not only in a higher degree than we at this moment, but than we as a nation have ever possessed it. ... I have to admit that some of these things are great sculpture” (65-66). The tension between Fry’s tone and the content of his claims is significant. His essay registers a profound undermining of Western aesthetics and the sense of cultural superiority they uphold, signaling a remapping of the global geography of artistic value. At the same time, his wry tone distances him from those in Britain who would be excessively shocked by the disruption of the “right little, tight little world” of tradition: Fry’s criticism hints that he is cosmopolitan enough to accept with equanimity new artistic discoveries from wherever in the world they arise. In an additional distancing move, though, Fry seems to hold at bay the full force of the carvings that he addresses by

positioning what he sees as their relative artistic superiority as an anomaly that does not challenge the larger cultural superiority of the West; whatever threat they pose is regarded as small enough to greet with amused condescension.

This last move can be understood as restricting the discussion to the level of form. The primary formal achievement of this sculpture, according to Fry, is that, “[w]ithout ever attaining to anything like representation accuracy” they attain “complete plastic freedom” (66). In other words, this sculpture is truly three dimensional in ways that Western sculpture is not. Fry’s description of these qualities is worth quoting more extensively:

Generally speaking, one may say that [the sculptor’s] plastic sense leads him to give its utmost amplitude and relief to all the protuberant parts of the body, and to get thereby an extraordinarily emphatic and impressive sequence of planes. So far from clinging to two dimensions, as we tend to do, he actually underlines, as it were, the three-dimensionality of his forms. It is in some such way, I suspect that he manages to give to his forms *their disconcerting vitality, the suggestion that they make of being not mere echoes of actual figures, but of possessing an inner life of their own*. If the negro artist wanted to make people believe in the potency of his idols he certainly set about it in the right way (67; emphasis added).

Fry’s reading is exemplary of modernist aesthetics in that it valorizes what he called “plastic form,” the assertive three-dimensional nature of sculpture that eschews bas-relief. He praises the carvings for their truth to the medium itself.²³ They are, Fry argues, fundamentally three-dimensional with no trace of painting, drawing, or writing. The first

part of this passage is descriptive and formalist: Fry's interest in the non-naturalistic depiction of anatomy and the achievement of a geometric series of planes resonates unsurprisingly with the European post-Impressionist art that Fry championed. The emphasized portion of the passage, however, begins to betray a sense of the destabilizing threat that Fry hints at more ironically at the beginning of his piece. The "vitality" that he identifies is not a primitive simplicity to be celebrated or knowingly imitated; it is "disconcerting." He follows this with his semi-ironic observation about the power these "idols" might have had over those who might, Fry seems to imagine, have believed them to be alive.²⁴ While Fry's tone is once again distancing, his statement nonetheless expresses with force the extent to which these carvings present something different from what Western art has had to offer, and that this difference is marked by the African sculpture's being-in-itself, its self-generating energy.

Later in the essay, Fry is at pains to keep the threats posed by this sculpture at a manageably formal level. He remarks that "It is curious that a people who produced such great artists did not produce also a culture in our sense of the word" (67). The racist ethnocentrism of such comments is not to be denied, even as they contrast with what is to some extent a radically open aesthetic curiosity on Fry's part. Indeed, this tension in Fry's work has invited some of the criticisms against it. For Torgovnick, "[r]eading Fry with regard to the primitive is like witnessing a tug of war: on one side, and almost winning, is the innovative Fry, free of contemporary prejudices; on the other side, and finally dragging his opponent through the mud, is a Fry who thinks and speaks in the rhetoric of colonialism."²⁵ Although she does so while using the word "primitive" more frequently and freely than Fry himself does, Torgovnick makes the important point that

Fry fails to differentiate between the different African ethnic groups he addresses and “shows no recognition that the objects discussed as museum pieces were often functional items, and sometimes sacred objects, in the daily life of special rituals of a people.”²⁶ The charge is fair enough: Fry pays little attention to the social function of the art he discusses, not to mention the imperialist violence that made its presence in a London gallery possible.

Indeed, Fry’s writing about African art seems to ignore African people. The unknown creator of these works is referred to in passing as “he”: assumed to be singular, assumed to be male. Meanwhile, the figures themselves receive much more full attention. Fry’s discussion of their form makes an insistent, detailed case for their aesthetic value and, as I have shown, the discussion shades into something deeper: an ambivalent acknowledgment of their disconcerting force. While the sculptor fades into the background, the sculptures stand on their own in the full strength of their extraordinary plasticity. Fry’s investment in these sculptures is that they have no tendency toward bas-relief, meaning no attachment to a particular surface or background. This is, on one level, the ethnocentric brand of formalism that Torgovnick considers it to be. However, Fry’s turn from artist to artwork can be taken as modeling a productive way of reading the movement of African art in the early twentieth century. The power that Fry cedes, even if in spite of himself, to the sculptures raises the possibility that these artworks exert a force that is not readily explained in terms of authors’ intentions or viewers’ desires.

Fry’s text, despite some implicit protestations to the contrary, generates uncertainty about how African art is made, who makes it, and what it means, even as it both asserts and demonstrates this art’s significance. I suggest that there may be some

value in working from something like the position in which the paradoxical uncertainties of Fry's writing leaves the reader, and that doing so need not entail adopting Fry's ethnocentrism or lack of curiosity about African art's indigenous cultural contexts. Rather than being disconcerted by the vitality of this art, contemporary scholars might embrace its power to disconcert aesthetic complacencies. At the same time, rather than ascribing "vitality" to African art in the primitivist sense of opposing it to the "civilized," we can read this vitality simply as its power to produce meaning both in its original cultural contexts and in its circulation, in other words a strategic embrace of "vitality" as a corrective to the "victimization" with which postmodern or postcolonial narratives of appropriation have often described African art's global travels. Fry's turn away from the artist-as-author toward the independent artwork represents an inversion of what Gotthold Ephraim Lessing describes in *Laocoön* (1766) as Homer's approach in his depiction of the shield of Achilles. Lessing argues that Homer shows the shield in the making rather than in its completion, "transforming what is coexistent in his subject into what is consecutive, and thereby making the living picture of an action out of the tedious painting of an object."²⁷ In contrast, Fry downplays the consecutive to insist on the coexistence of the sculptures' constituent parts, insisting on their three-dimensional quality, their status as sculpture in the round. If he diminishes the artist's role in making the object, and offends against its cultural context in the process, he nonetheless emphasizes the art object's capacity to make meanings outside of its context, meanings that he does not claim to fully understand. Because of this, Fry's writing cannot be dismissed as nothing more than culturally imperialist appropriation.

Meanwhile, Lessing's discussion of the shield of Achilles in Homer brings us to a foundational moment in the history of thinking about the relationship between literature and the visual arts, specifically the practice of ekphrasis, the literary mode to which I will turn repeatedly throughout this project. Ekphrasis, from the Greek for "drawing out" or "drawing forth," can, depending on the context, mean anything from, most narrowly, a particular subset of poems that explicitly focus on particular artworks to, most broadly, almost any kind of literary description at all. I join W.J.T. Mitchell in following James Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation."²⁸ Before leaving it at that, however, a few late-twentieth century debates among Mitchell, Heffernan and Murray Krieger on the meaning of ekphrasis are worth briefly revisiting. Krieger's work on ekphrasis builds on the central dividing line that Lessing draws between space and time. According to Lessing, the visual arts are spatial, while their literary counterparts are temporal. This implies for Lessing that the two kinds of art should keep to their own sides of the divide rather than attempting to imitate one another, especially because he considers literature the superior form, since it is not bound to the "single moment of time to which art must confine itself by virtue of its material limitations."²⁹ Krieger, however, sees ekphrasis as a way of acting on the irresistible desire to import the spatial fixity of the visual arts into literary temporality; the desire to cross the boundary between the literary and the plastic becomes an overarching literary principle according to his approach. Recalling that the earliest definition of ekphrasis referred to description in general, Krieger argues for a return to "this original, more universal sense" by "trac[ing] the ekphrastic as it is seen occurring all along the spectrum of spatial and visual emulation in words."³⁰ Krieger thus asserts that the impulse toward

ekphrasis is a shaping force in Western literature generally: “[A]s the Western imagination has seized upon and used the ekphrastic principle, it has sought—through the two-sidedness of language as a medium of the verbal arts—to comprehend the simultaneity, in the verbal figure, of fixity and flow, of an image at once grasped and yet slipping away through the crevices of language.”³¹

Heffernan and Mitchell each offer important criticisms of Krieger’s expansive model. Heffernan argues for a more narrow and materially bounded definition of ekphrasis. Furthermore, he differs from Krieger’s view that ekphrasis involves the longing of writers to achieve in their work the spatial quality of the plastic arts, the union of the verbal and the visual, the spatial and the formal. Ekphrasis, for Heffernan, “deliberately foregrounds the difference between verbal and visual representation—and in so doing forestalls or at the very least complicates any illusionistic effect.”³² Mitchell, meanwhile, questions the very existence of the boundaries between the verbal and the visual that animate the work of Lessing, Krieger, and Heffernan. Mitchell identifies three intellectual orientations towards ekphrasis: “ekphrastic indifference,” which holds that ekphrasis is impossible due to “the inherent, essential properties of various media”; “ekphrastic hope,” the idea that the gap between language and art can be overcome in the imagination through the successful use of ekphrasis in literature; and “ekphrastic fear,” which dreads the collapse between the literary and the visual.³³ This last viewpoint is most closely associated with Lessing’s separation of the poetic and the plastic arts, while “ekphrastic hope” refers to the still, spatial moment toward which Krieger sees so much literature striving. Against all of these orientations, Mitchell asserts that “there is no essential difference between texts and images, and thus no gap between the media to be

overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies.”³⁴ He suggests that the hopes and anxieties surrounding the line between the visual and the verbal are really about the line between self and other, a relationship in which the verbal stands for the (often white, male) subject while the visual is aligned with the (often female, non-white) object.³⁵ This insight is fundamental for the present project, in which I consider ekphrastic representations of African artworks, both real and imagined, in a wide variety of contexts. While Mitchell’s argument usefully begins to think about the politics of ekphrasis, the perspectives on ekphrasis offered by all of the above-cited theorists nonetheless remain potentially operative for me in the readings that will follow: my recasting of the place of African art in twentieth-century literature, and the formal and political questions this entails, requires flexibility.

The question of ekphrastic representation returns us to the passage from *Women in Love* discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Lawrence’s novel is centered on the Brangwen sisters, Ursula and Gudrun, and their cataclysmic love affairs with Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich. The manifold political, sexual, and psychological questions raised in the novel have of course spawned a larger critical than can be fully addressed in this chapter. While I am interested in the novel’s representation of African art, a very small portion of the novel, I also read *Women in Love* in its entirety as a novel of creativity and agency. Birkin’s statement on the entropy of modern European civilization—“There is no production in us now, only sordid and foul mechanicalness” (369)—is a representative statement of the value to which Lawrence accords creative agency. It is crucial to recognize, however, that creative agency is not, in the world of the

novel, strictly congruent with the individual, intending, conscious agency of the human subject.

Many of the novel's most memorable moments—the rabbit attack, the wrestling match between Rupert and Gerald, the horse's reaction to the locomotive, and Rupert's naked paroxysm in the woods after he is violently struck by his lover, Hermione Roddice—can be grouped together as explosive manifestations of an agentic power that is distributed across people, animals, and things. (Lawrence uses the term *will*, not agency, but I use the more scholarly term in part because it can be more broadly applied to moments that are not best discussed in Lawrence's Nietzschean language.) Lawrence's characterization of Hermione, meanwhile, provides a particularly clear example of how he sees the difference between agency and conscious intentions: "There was a lull in the talk, as it was arrested by her unconscious but all powerful will" (93); "Hermione writhed in her soul, knowing what she could not know" (94); "Hermione knew his motion, thought not in her consciousness" (102). These passages, in which agency and even knowledge in general can assert themselves without consciousness or intention exemplify the impersonal networks of action and power that operate throughout the novel. The other characters in the novel are no more fully conscious than Hermione, but the particular language that Lawrence uses with regard to her ways of knowing mirror language that appears in the scenes of sculptural ekphrasis that are this chapter's main concern.

Women in Love's networked quality is also reflected at the level in its use of patterning and its oscillation between realist narration and language that is heightened, repetitive, and extreme. Leo Bersani has argued that these qualities signal that "the

dominant mode of *Women in Love* is interrogative rather than assertive.”³⁶ Bersani’s reading usefully reminds us not to allow the novel’s strong language, and the frequent, assertive pronouncements that its characters favor, to take the novel as more confident and closed than it is. The novel’s treatment of African art cuts across both its realist and romantic registers. Its location in this space of rhetorical oscillation invites us to consider the novel’s approach to African, then, as interrogative, rather than the confident application of a simple primitivist narrative. With these precepts on the novel as a whole in mind, I will turn to Lawrence’s writing on African sculpture in particular.

The portrayal of African art in the novel is salient in that it crystallizes many of the complexities of Lawrence’s critique of modernity in terms that are particularly revealing both of Lawrence’s interest in the plastic arts—an important theme throughout his oeuvre—and his thinking about the global character of the emerging modernity that he so strongly resisted. While the African art in the novel can be read, and has been by many scholars,³⁷ as inextricably bound up with other of the novel’s themes and explicable through Lawrence’s own ideas about race, nation and creativity, the following will at least temporarily and provisionally single these moments out. I will experiment with reading these moments in a way that will not attempt to resolve whatever contradictions arise in their treatment by Lawrence or any of his characters.

The African carvings make their appearance fairly early in the novel, as Gerald Crich is returning from a night out with “Pussum” Darrington to the apartment shared by Julius Halliday and Maxim Libidnikov (and their South Asian servant, Hasan). Lawrence describes what Gerald sees upon arriving: “It was an ordinary London sitting-room in a flat, evidently taken furnished, rather common and ugly. But there were several negro

statues, wood-carvings from West Africa, strange and disturbing, the carved negroes looked almost like the foetus of a human being” (75). As in Fry’s writing, the African carvings are described as so alien that they disturb the European viewer by their very presence. The fact, however, that the statues are presented against the backdrop of a common, London flat, the furnished nature of which suggests the prefabricated urban modernity that the novel excoriates, suggests that they may have some potential in pointing toward an alternative to the present predicament. Meanwhile, the carvings are compared to human fetuses, a comparison that suggests the primitivist notion of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny. Beyond this, the construction “foetus of a human being” creates some distance between the statues and the realm of the human, a distance that could be read predictably as dehumanizing Africans, but which could also be taken as recognizing the nonhuman otherness of the art objects as things-in-themselves.

The narrative turns its attention to a particular statue, and Lawrence offers both Maxim’s explanation of it and Gerald’s personal reaction:

One [statue] was a woman sitting naked in a strange posture, and looking tortured, her abdomen stuck out. The young Russian [Maxim] explained that she was sitting in childbirth, clutching the ends of a band that hung from her neck, one in each hand, so that she could bear down, and help labor. The strange, transfixed, rudimentary face of the woman again reminded Gerald of a foetus, it was also rather wonderful, conveying the suggestion of the extreme of physical sensation, beyond the limits of mental consciousness (75).

The turn from the statues as fetuses to a focus on a particular statue in labor continues the theme of vitality, a vitality that is perhaps, to play further on Fry's phrase, paradoxically all the more disconcerting for manifesting itself in a dead piece of wood. Maxim offers an explanation of the statue that reduces the particular features of the carving to comprehensible narrative functions: the woman depicted is hanging onto bands that hang from her neck to help her with the labor. But Lawrence implies that Maxim's exegesis is not the whole story, and that Gerald's less erudite response gets at a deeper truth. Without transition, the sentence containing Maxim's explanation is followed with a direct return to "the strange, transfixed, rudimentary face" itself that Gerald finds at once repugnant and wonderful. For Gerald, the carving exceeds the boundaries of consciousness; viewing the sculpture becomes one of the novel's many experiences of extremity. Gerald will not, however, express his attraction to the sculpture out loud; instead, he asks Maxim if he finds the sculptures obscene. Maxim replies that he has "never defined the obscene" and thinks "they are very good" (75). Before the men retire for bed, we learn that the room also contains "two new pictures ... in the Futurist manner" (75). Lawrence represents modernist art's twin impulses toward the primitive and the avant-garde within the space of Halliday's flat.

The following day, Gerald, who has spent the night with Pussum, and his male counterpart in the novel, Rupert Birkin (who is often taken to be Lawrence's stand-in) discuss the carving in explicitly aesthetic terms. Birkin, who like the rest of the men in this scene is naked, "white and strangely present" (80), approaches the carving to answer Gerald's question about his opinion of it. Before he delivers his opinion—"It is art" (80)—Lawrence again describes the statue, "her nude, protuberant body crouched in a

strange, clutching posture, her hands gripping the ends of the band, above her breast” (80). Rupert’s pronouncement, presented abruptly and without transition following the description of the carving as grotesque and strange, presents in miniature the shock of the appearance of non-Western material as bearing aesthetic value, the dynamic discussed by Fry and exemplified most emphatically by the outraged public response to post-Impressionism. The passage oscillates away from the conversation back to Gerald’s mind:

He saw vividly with his spirit the grey, forward stretching face of the negro woman, African and tense, abstracted in utter physical stress. It was a terrible face, void, peaked, abstracted almost into meaninglessness by the weight of sensation beneath. He saw the Pussum in it. As in a dream, he knew her. (80)

That Gerald associates the statue in childbirth with Pussum implies that his reaction registers disgust at the female body, but at the same time, it is notable that Gerald does not react to the statue as realistically corporeal. Instead, the word “abstracted” is repeated: the salient quality of the statues is thus not completely about gender or race, but rather something that exceeds the boundaries of individual consciousness, something ineffably difficult to express.

While the definition of “African” as an adjective in this sentence is ambiguous, it seems to refer more to an abstracted challenge to meaning than any particular ethnic characteristics. When Gerald challenges Rupert’s assertion that the statue is art, Rupert replies that the carving “conveys a complete truth ... the whole truth of that state, whatever you feel about it” (80). He argues, furthermore, that it is “high” art because

“[t]here are centuries and hundreds of centuries of development in a straight line, behind that carving; it is an awful pitch of culture, of a definite sort” (80). Gerald, who “hated the sheer African thing” (80), challenges Rupert’s definition of culture, which Rupert then defines as “[p]ure culture in sensation, culture in the physical consciousness, really ultimate physical consciousness, mindless, utterly sensual. It is so sensual as to be final, supreme” (80). Rupert’s repetitive insistence on the physicality of the consciousness that the statue evokes—whether he is attributing consciousness here to the statue, its artist, or its viewer remains one of the passage’s many ambiguities³⁸—recalls Fry’s interest in the self-contained, three dimensional physicality that he identified in African sculpture. Here, in the cosmopolitan and sexually transgressive space of Halliday’s flat, the anithumanist Rupert finds in the carving of a non-modern (to his understanding) culture a potential aesthetic path toward the explosion of individual human subjectivity that he so profoundly desires.

The narrative moves away from the carving at this point, only to return midway through the novel, when Rupert recalls the statue while pondering his dissatisfaction with his affair with Ursula. Lawrence expands his ekphrasis to include more descriptive detail as he portrays Rupert’s memory than he does when the carving is part of the setting. We learn, belatedly, details about the carving’s size and a slightly more specific sense of its provenance: “There came back to him one, a statuette about two feet high, a tall, slim, elegant figure from West Africa, in dark wood, glossy and suave. It was a woman, with hair dressed high, like a melon-shaped dome” (262). In addition to the new accumulation of detail in this resumed ekphrasis, we learn that the statue has had a greater effect on Rupert than was revealed during his discussion of the work with Gerald; she has indeed

become “one of his soul’s intimates” (262). The statue’s re-emergence in the novel continues through an extended passage that combines more visual description of the carving with extraordinarily broad and fantastic claims for its larger significance:

Her body was long and elegant her face was crushed tiny like a beetle’s, she had rows of round heavy collars, like a column of quoits, on her neck. He remembered her: her astonishing cultured elegance, her diminished, beetle face, the astounding long elegant body, on short, ugly legs, with such protuberant buttocks, so weighty and unexpected below her slim long loins. She knew what he himself did not know. She had thousands of years of purely sensual, purely unspiritual knowledge behind her. It must have been thousands of years since her race had died, mystically: that is, since the relation between the senses and the outspoken mind had broken, leaving the experience all in one sort, mystically sensual. Thousands of years ago, that which was imminent in himself must have taken place in these Africans; the goodness, the holiness, the desire for creation and productive happiness must have lapsed, leaving the single impulse for knowledge in one sort, mindless, progressive knowledge through the senses, knowledge arrested and ending in the sense, mystic knowledge in disintegration and dissolution, knowledge such as the beetles have, which live purely within the world of corruption and cold dissolution. This was why her face looked like a beetle’s; this was why the Egyptians worshipped the ball-rolling scarab; because of the principle of knowledge in dissolution and corruption (262-263).

While it is unclear upon what basis Rupert considers the culture that produced this status to have declined and died, the fact that he does so notably complicates the “primitivism” of the novel’s stance toward non-Western art. Far from identifying in the African carving a source of simple, naïve vitality, Lawrence positions African culture in a global matrix of rising and falling civilizations (although his assumption that the carving was ancient is a symptomatic error of African art’s reception among European primitivists: they frequently overestimated the age of carvings from Africa). Rupert sees the statue as a kind of fossil of a vitality that has run dry. Further complicating the conventional primitivist relation of Western viewer and non-Western object, Rupert identifies with the carving in a way that breaches the subject/object divide—the decline he identifies in the carving, the lapse in “the desire for creative and productive happiness,” is the same decline he feels incipient in himself. This can also be read as simply a solipsistic projection, but it matters that the novel does not see it that way. Indeed, the passage, in keeping with the anti-humanism that Rupert expresses volubly throughout the novel, is not even strictly about the relations between people at all. Rupert’s comparison between the appearance of the statue and a beetle suggests a move toward the kind of “nonhuman becoming” that has already been signaled in the very fact of Rupert’s identification with a statue.

While race and geography are at issue in this moment, so are animals and (art) objects. What this suggests is that the passage is about more than just the ethical relations among people or cultures. Recognizing this creates an opening toward a new understanding of this extremely difficult passage in the novel. Even two critics who recognize the complexity of Lawrence’s position and eschew a too-easy political critique

of Lawrence's positions still tend to read the passage in ways that keep Rupert front and center, and that evaluate his evaluations. Jack Stewart argues that Rupert's "reactions to African carvings and images of dark blood-consciousness shift from empathizing to critiquing the imbalance of energy in all cultures, including the industrial."³⁹ Donna Jones, in her recent book on vitalism, reads the carving in terms of what it possesses for Rupert, which she calls, convincingly enough, a "faint power, a mere shadow of its animistic potency, and is, as a result, depicted in a state of impotency. What power it has comes only from its ability to inspire reflection and prompt anxieties. The statuette becomes a tabula rasa onto which Birkin reads his own alienation."⁴⁰ These readings make perfect sense as far as they go, and Stewart's mention of "blood-consciousness" reminds us of fascist overtones in the novel that should not be ignored.

An important sentence in the passage in question, however, says something about the statue that points towards a different reading: "*She knew what he himself did not know*" (262; emphasis added). What happens if we take this sentence seriously, not as a mere projection, but as an attempt to grant agency to the work of art? The phrasing, however fancifully or willfully, shifts agency from the viewer to artwork. It is a surrender of power. Rather than mastering or claiming to master the art object by describing it verbally, this piece of free indirect discourse entails a search on the part of Rupert/Lawrence something profoundly different than the conventional aestheticizing ekphrastic move in which the white male subject kills the black female object into art. Jane Bennett has recently a "theory of distributive agency," a kind of agency that "does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect."⁴¹ Rupert Birkin's consideration of a

similarly distributive model of agency into what can otherwise appear to be a classic case of Western appropriation of the “primitive” other.

New materialism, similar to the Latour-influenced work of Felski and Cheng but also more directly engaged with both the physical sciences and political theory, also seems not to acknowledge that many of its principles were anticipated by traditional non-Western, “animist” thought. Caroline Rooney’s work on the possibility of an “animist reading” does just this, employing reading strategies that are somewhat similar to those suggested by some of the work I have just cited while placing them in an older line of thought that includes African sources. Rooney argues that “with animism, the phenomenal world is understood through subjectifying rather than objectifying it, where this is not simply a matter of the subjectivity of perception but of perceiving the subjectivity of the so-called object. In this, ‘man’ would be considered to be less of a transcendental subject and more of a being amongst other beings.”⁴² When Lawrence writes with regard to the carving, “She knew what he did not know,” he makes a similarly *subjectifying* move. In doing so, he begins to enact a theory of agency that exceeds the bounds of the human subjects to make room for nonhuman actors. Subjectifying is, I argue, distinct from the complete *subjectification* that would entail the transformation of an object into a subject in such a way that leaves the underlying terms of the subject/object divide firmly in place. Instead, I read the subjectifying imagination in Lawrence as setting into motion a state of becoming-subject that never fully solidifies into a state of being-subject.

The subversion of subjectivity in *Women in Love*’s ekphrases is in line with Lawrence’s larger novelistic practice. In discussing *The Rainbow*, Lawrence wrote to

Edward Garnett, “You musn’t look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic state which it needs a deeper sense than any we’ve been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically-unchanged element.”⁴³ Surely, this letter applies at least as well to *Women in Love*, which is marked by constant oscillation between different opinions and emotional states within and between its characters. What happens to the subject/object divide that we assume to subtend ekphrastic representation when ekphrasis occurs in the context of a novel that struggles against the very idea of ego? Let us take stock of what kind of ekphrasis has occurred. Lawrence has written about an “African” statue, which turns out later to be a “West” African statue. While the novel offers no more specifics, we do know that Lawrence first encountered West African art in the London home of the composer and theosophist Philip Heseltine (also known as Peter Warlock), and that Heseltine provided the model for Halliday (and later sued Lawrence over his treatment in the novel). We know further that Lawrence went on to read the influential work of German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1873-1938), with a focus on the Yoruba culture of what is now Nigeria, and that the carving described in the novel is likely a Yoruba maternity statue.⁴⁴

Frobenius’s influence explains the novel’s assertion that the statue represents a culture in decline and degeneration, a claim that in itself complicates the conventional narrative of modernist primitivism’s ascription of youth and vitality to non-European cultures. In the first volume of his series, *The Voice of Africa*, Frobenius focuses on his travels among the Yoruba in the city of Ile-Ifé. Frobenius’s work contributed to the countering of the notion among Europeans that Africa had no history prior to the

appearance of Islam on the continent and effusively praised Yoruba art. At the same time, however, Frobenius's work excoriates the Yoruba people as dishonest scoundrels, makes frequent calls for racial solidarity among Europeans in the name of the imperialist cause, and claims that the achievements of Yoruba art are not African but holdovers from the lost civilization of Atlantis.⁴⁵ An examination of Frobenius's work reveals that Lawrence was influenced by an argument in which racism and formal analysis are complexly intertwined. Frobenius describes his reaction to discovering fragments of a terracotta head in Yorubaland: "Here were the remains of a very ancient and fine type of art, infinitely nobler than the comparatively coarse stone-images not even well preserved. These meagre relics were eloquent of a symmetry, a vitality, a delicacy of form directly reminiscent of ancient Greece and a proof that, once upon a time, a race, far superior in strain to the negro, had been settled here."⁴⁶ In Frobenius's opinion, contemporary Yoruba artworks were "poor and degenerate in form."⁴⁷ Lawrence incorporates this deathbound reading of West African sculpture into his novel's own particular patterned mythology: the black carving, as symbol of "dissolution and corruption," contrasts with the whiteness of Gerald Crich's snowy demise at the novel's end (a contrast prefigured by the distinction between the carving and the white bodies of the naked men in Halliday's flat during the carving's first appearance in the novel). Lawrence foreshadows Gerald's death during the passage in which the statue returns to Rupert's consciousness: unlike the West African "sun-destruction," the white race will "fulfill a mystery of ice-destructive knowledge, snow-abstract annihilation" (263).

Although Frobenius strongly affected Lawrence's thinking about Africa, we cannot say for sure what combination of carvings and his own creative imagination led to

what appears in his novel.⁴⁸ His ekphrasis is an example of what John Hollander calls “notional ekphrasis,” the representation of an art object imagined by an author rather than the description of an actually existing work.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as W.J.T. Mitchell points out, “in a certain sense all ekphrasis is notional ... Even those forms of ekphrasis that occur in the presence of the described image disclose a tendency to alienate or displace the object, to make it disappear in favor of the textual image being produced by the ekphrasis.”⁵⁰ This phenomenon is clearly at work in *Women in Love*; the last passage in particular moves from the art object to worlds of speculation and introspection on the part of Rupert that would never be reducible to the art object, even if he were referring to an identified, actually existing carving. The way in which Lawrence spreads the ekphrasis across three different passages in the novel, adding details as he goes, further increases the proportion of temporal narrative to whatever spatial stillness or iconicity the presence of the sculpture’s image might achieve. But, again, these qualities can be found in all manner of ekphrasis. Even Krieger, who has far greater faith in the spatializing potential of ekphrasis than does Mitchell, points out that such foundational ekphrases as Homer’s shield and Keats’s urn “take their special meaning by exceeding their fictive spatial objects in a number of ways.”⁵¹

Women in Love, however, raises an additional question: What if the object exceeds the ekphrasis as well? On one hand, it is obvious that artworks exceed, or elude, being captured in verbal description. On the other hand, the idea of the elusiveness being somehow represented within a literary text seems as paradoxically impossible as Mitchell considers the initial ekphrastic gesture itself to be. Lawrence, I argue, makes an attempt to account for how objects exceed capture by ekphrasis. Because of this, his

representation of African art is in part a meditation on the act of representation and thus a more careful act of writing than he has been given credit for. Despite Lawrence's racist ideologies, his turn toward West African carving in the novel is not only an early instance of the Western novel recognizing the artistic value of African material culture. It also represents an opening toward the active power of this body of art in a fashion that recognizes its meanings are not easily assimilated by Western appropriators. In the next section, I will show that, by the time of *Women in Love*'s publication in Britain, the place of African artistic production in global modernity had already been asserted even more forcefully and expansively—in another part of the British Empire.

II. J.E. Casely Hayford's Assertion of Coevalness

At once a novel, an essay, and a utopian fantasia, Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* mirrors canonical modernism in its self-referential and hybrid form, but in many ways contrasts sharply from it in style and tone. Although this text is well known as a political document of Black internationalism, I consider it as a literary creation so as not to divide in advance the literary from aesthetic from the political according to a predetermined and likely Eurocentric standard. I begin by discussing some important passages from *Ethiopia Unbound* in a way that is meant to be largely descriptive, adopting a position of openness toward the text with the goal of seeing how it defines itself and its own relation to modernity. A truly global approach to modernist studies will be one that will allow for the possibility of its own redefinition as a result of reading under-studied literature from the global South in this way.

Hayford's first chapter, "An Ethiopian Conservative," introduces us to its central character, Kwamankra, a young man from the Gold Coast who is studying in London. The chapter establishes Hayford's insistence upon the fundamental value of an Ethiopian—the term is a synonym for "African" in this context—worldview that is distinct from, and equal if not superior to, the cultures of Europe. In a debate with his English friend, Whitely, Kwamankra needles his counterpart about the limitations of the English language and the hypocrisies of Christianity, arguing that "the future of the world is with the East. The nation that can, in the next century, show the greatest output of spiritual strength, that is the nation that shall lead the world, and as Buddha from Africa taught Asia, so may Africa again lead the way."⁵² Kwamankra's claim sets forth the book's prophetic tone as well as its frequent blurring of the boundaries between Africa and other non-Western zones. In contrast to later nationalist African writing, Hayford prefers to speak of the African continent in its entirety and frequently refers to all non-European culture as the East.

As in the above quotation, Kwamankra will continue to serve as the mouthpiece for many of the book's central ideas, and the trajectory of his narrative seems to allegorize the path that Hayford envisions for African cultures in general. Donald Wehrs takes Hayford to task for failing to provide "any detailed depiction or consideration of pre-colonial culture and history" and for aligning Africa with imperial Japan in ways that undercut his anti-imperialist argument.⁵³ Such an analysis as Wehrs offers, however, is insufficiently open to the radically forward-looking stance that the book's disruption of temporal and spatial, especially national, boundaries makes possible. This radically disruptive logic also manifests itself at the level of plot. Kwamankra's life proceeds

roughly as follows: he meets Mansa, an ideal embodiment of Fanti womanhood, marries her and returns to the Gold Coast. Mansa dies giving birth to Katsina, who dies soon thereafter. Kwamankra falls ill and, under anesthesia during an operation, travels to the *Nanamu Krome*, the land of the Fanti ancestors. Here he encounters his wife and daughter, who have been transformed into goddesses. Mansa sends Kwamankra back to Earth with a prophetic charge: “Say unto the mighty that the cry of the afflicted and the distressed among the sons of Ethiopia has come up to us, and we will visit the earth. For gold the oppressor will find tinsel, and for precious stone adamantine rock which will fall upon the tinsel and grind it to dust, and the wind will scatter that which is ground unto the four corners of the earth, and men shall see it and wonder at the work of the gods” (63). Kwamankra returns to Earth and fulfills this charge by “bringing back his people to their primitive simplicity and faith” (75) through writing a book entitled *Ethiopia Unbound*, which circulates throughout the world and spreads his Kwamankra’s conception of the African way, engaging with actual intellectuals of the African diaspora, including Edward Wilmot Blyden, whose ideas Kwamankra embraces, and W.E.B. Du Bois, whose theory of double consciousness Kwamankra roundly rejects. The book ends in 1925—fourteen years in the future from its actual publication date—with Kwamankra having established a journal *Gold Coast Nation and Ethiopian Review* and, more importantly, having successfully pushed Africa towards its place on the world stage. The text, which is quite critical of Christianity, ends somewhat paradoxically by quoting Biblical prophecy: “And a little child shall lead them” (215).

This summary of Kwamankra’s story, however, only goes part of the way in explaining just how little the book conforms to Western generic expectations of any kind,

with regard to either fiction or nonfiction. Kwamankra's trajectory is interrupted throughout the book with other fictional narratives, as well as essays, some of which are presented more specifically as speeches. The fictional narratives serve as fables or parables that both analyze the European imperial ideology and instruct readers on the risks of straying from Ethiopian mores. For example, the second chapter cuts away from Kwamankra's narrative to introduce the story of Tandor-Kuma, a student living in England with Ekuba, a woman whom he married according to indigenous custom in the Gold Coast, but who no longer interests him since his seduction by English culture. The brief chapter ends with Ekuba leaving Tandor-Kuma, and the pair are not heard from again until the book's thirteenth chapter, which finds Tandor-Kuma back in West Africa, remarried and ill with malaria. His nurse turns out to be Ekuba, who asserts her rights as Tandor-Kuma's first wife and regains his love. In another of the book's parallel narratives, Kwamankra's British friend Whitely travels to the Gold Coast as a colonial chaplain, where he finds that his Christian ideals function in the colonies as little other than hypocritical justifications for British policy.

As this overview suggests, *Ethiopia Unbound* may appear on the surface irrelevant to the literary modernism as it was developing in Europe and the United States at the time of its publication in that it is both heavily didactic and ragged or disorganized at the level of formal construction. Its reputation among literary scholars, though growing, is slight. The same could of course be said for most anglophone writing produced in Africa prior to the middle of the twentieth century; the work of showing that African print literature does not originate with Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) or Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has only begun. Even within Ghanaian

literary circles, however, the status of *Ethiopia Unbound* has, according to Stephanie Newell, been minimized. Due perhaps to its resistance to categorization, it has been denied the honor of being the “first” Ghanaian novel in favor of educator R.E. Obeng’s much later *Eighteenpence* (1943), a didactic work that nonetheless more clearly presents itself as a fiction.⁵⁴ If the generic instability of *Ethiopia Unbound* has led to its marginalization in the past, however, that very quality offers invites us to consider the book as an early instance of African modernism. It is after all a formally experimental literary response to the historical crises of the twentieth century.

Newell describes *Ethiopia Unbound* as a “pre-realist” novel that, like the eighteenth-century novels *Moll Flanders* and *Clarissa*, exhibits “the infiltration of genres such as the Christian sermon and the domestic conduct book.”⁵⁵ Newell’s comparison between Hayford’s text and earlier British works helpfully highlights what she terms the book’s “ethical dimensions of narration,”⁵⁶ but her alignment between early twentieth-century West African writing and the early days of the English novel has temporal implications that should give us pause. The formally experimental elements of *Ethiopia Unbound*, specifically its non-realism, genre-mixing, and spatiotemporal play, just as easily qualify it as a work of modernism, a parallel to the aesthetic response to early-twentieth century modernity that was taking place contemporaneously in Europe. In his discussion of non-Western modernisms, Dipesh Chakrabarty, following Marshall Berman’s Baudelairean definition of modernism’s essential qualities, describes modernist literature as “the aesthetic means by which an urban and literary class subject to the invasive forces of modernization seeks to create, however falteringly, a sense of being at home in the modern city.”⁵⁷ With some revision, Hayford’s work fits this rubric.

Although the urban space of London is emphasized more frequently than Gold Coast urban spaces, *Ethiopia Unbound* is firmly situated in a world that is being rapidly changed by imperially-driven modernity. Hayford's experimental modernism challenges the definition of "home," both re-imagining and re-enchanting the world through extensive focus on the otherworldly space of the Nanamu-Krome, and calling on the world at large to make itself hospitable to the forces of Ethiopianism which will insistently traverse the globe, in part through the material volume that is *Ethiopia Unbound* itself.

The book's insistence on participating in literary modernity, and in doing so on its own terms, forces us to consider expanding the definition of modernism beyond even Chakrabarty's rubric. While Chakrabarty's model is based on temporalities of urbanization, another approach to transnational modernism would involve spatial and synchronic analysis. Jean-Michel Rabaté's *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* provides an example of this kind of work, calling attention to "the links between the modern and the awareness, then recent ... that there was something like a world literature" and acknowledging that discussing modernism "on a world-wide scale renders it impossible to concentrate exclusively on the formal properties of the various achievements considered: the variations from medium to medium, from country to country, are such that no single standard of 'advancement' could be defined."⁵⁸ Rabaté does not, however, include any discussion of authors from sub-Saharan Africa, even as he devotes subsections of his book to Frobenius and to Ethiopianism as written about by W.E.B. Du Bois. That Hayford's work is so close—temporally, formally, and thematically—to the subjects of Rabaté's study while remaining absent from it highlights both the necessity

and the very achievable possibility of including African texts in the narrative of global modernism's development in the early twentieth century.

Ethiopia Unbound makes its claim for its modernity, its claim for being of and indeed ahead of its time, in large part through its unique approach to its own textuality. The arrangement of inter-spliced narratives and polemics, which invite readers to read and re-read the book in sequences of their own choosing, underline the work's diegetic insistence on its status as a material, reproducible object that bears the power to circulate internationally. As I indicated above, Hayford's work is comprised of multiple fictional narratives combined with polemical essays and some historical and ethnographic information. The transitions between these elements of the text are frequently discontinuous. Indeed, this feature of the book's organization is surely part of the reason that readers have considered it a rudimentary proto-novel. I contend, on the contrary, that *Ethiopia Unbound* grapples in a formally experimental, and extraordinarily prescient, fashion with the vertiginous geopolitical challenges of twentieth-century modernity. It claims for itself, through its very structure and organization, the ability to think across the spatial and temporal breaks that serve, in the words of the Marxist geographer Edward W. Soja, to "hide consequences."⁵⁹ It does this in part by casting aside the strictures of the novel as a genre while at the same time freely using those novelistic elements that suit its purposes. While didactic Fanti oral tradition accounts to a significant extent for the text's form, Hayford mobilizes these traditions in a way that insists on—and assumes—their modernity as well as their global relevance.

In the way that the book as a whole cuts back and forth between different times, places, and kinds of narrative, it models at the level of its form the mobile and

multipronged viewpoint that Hayford considers necessary for seeing global power relations in their totality and for freeing the world from the depredations of imperialism. While specific examples cannot completely capture the effect of the book's structure in its entirety, the approach is signaled early in the text. The second chapter, which abandons Kwamankra's narrative for that of Tandor-Kuma and Ekuba, begins without transitioning from the preceding section or even initially informing the reader that scene and character have shifted entirely. The first chapter ends with Kwamankra saying goodbye to Whitely and the second chapter begins with "Silence prevailed in the room" (12). These spatial leaps are complemented by frequent shifts of temporality between the text's sections: Kwamankra's son grows from an infant to a young man between chapters, and as mentioned above the book's final chapter takes place in the future.

The shifting perspective allowed by the book's formal approach mirrors its thoroughgoing concern with transnationalism at the level of content. Hayford's assertions of African identity are never simply essentialist. Although this can be obscured by the fact that, like Du Bois, he conflates race and nation in the outmoded language of his era—for example in his calls for "original lines of racial development" (161) and "conserv[ing] the characteristics of the race" (165)—Hayford's discussions of race and nation are never simple; they treat race and nation as contingent categories. While there are certainly essentialist proclamations throughout the book, they are in a productive tension with other moves the books makes, both at the level of form and politics. (It should be added here that I do not assume essentialism or nationalism in the context of anticolonial struggle to be necessarily a bad thing; I merely seek to do full justice to the complexity of *Ethiopia Unbound* and to argue that it bears literary significance beyond its

status as a historical document of incipient anticolonial nationalism.) Hayford at once asserts the value of African ways of life while consistently evidencing an interest in engaging with other cultures on a level playing field. Anticipating the connection between cultural and political freedom that will be insisted upon by such major intellectuals of the African independence movement as Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral, Hayford writes that “no people could despise its own language, customs, and institutions and hope to avoid national death” (17).

Hayford’s *way* of writing about national culture, however, anticipates even more specifically Fanon’s reservations about the pitfalls of national consciousness even if it does not explicitly state them. This dialectic between the national and the global is performed by the first chapter, whose title, “An Ethiopian Conservative,” stands in some tension with Kwamankra’s activities during the chapter: he is in London studying comparative law and regaling his friend with his knowledge of Shakespeare (24-27). Kwamankra’s wife, Mansa, presented as a paragon of Ethiopian womanhood, also studies abroad in Germany. Note the juxtaposition between African clothing and English literature in the following description of Kwamankra and Mansa’s wedding: “Mansa appeared in church on the wedding-day in a simple African costume of her own design, tastefully got up, and when someone asked her the reason for her choice, she said she knew it would please her husband, and, besides, it answered best to her own conception of what was proper. And, ‘so, these were wed,’ to employ Tennyson’s words” (37). Hayford’s deployment of his mastery of English literature surely operates on one level as a Caliban-like appropriation of the colonizer’s tongue, but beyond that there is in the very

mixing of different kinds of production—African textiles, English literature—an implicit assertion of the modernity of both kinds of production and both cultures.

Hayford's celebration of African culture employs language that embraces the concept of the primitive as a response to the homogenizing forces of the British Empire. Hayford's concern with the encroachments of a bloodless, technological modernity are not dissimilar to that of European writers and artists who are considered to be primitivists, but the very fact of an African writer's engaging with this discourse at the time of its development is significant in that it disproves the idea that written responses to primitivist modernism in African literature appear only belatedly. Here is Hayford's description of an important interior in the book, Kwamankra's London apartment:

There was nothing remarkable about the rooms except that they were furnished in the Oriental style. Here and there, at convenient corners, were divans with rich cushions, embroidered in silk, and carpets of leopard skins into which the feet sank as one walked. On the walls were trophies, consisting principally of African weapons. There were to be seen a collection of musical instruments of all descriptions, some so simple as to make one wonder how any symphony could be got out of them. A well-filled shelf, with a plain oak desk, littered with written matter, with some flowers here and there, about completed the outward circumstances of the room into which our visitor was ushered (5-6).

Hayford's initial description of the room as being in the "Oriental" style accords with his above-mentioned practice of situating Africa as part of a broader non-Western world. Meanwhile, the African art found in Kwamankra's apartment are not the sculptural

showpieces which were then beginning to circulate in European capitals, but instead almost stereotypically “African” objects such as weapons and leopard-skin rugs, not unlike those mentioned in *Heart of Darkness*. Kwamankra’s explanation of his decorations to his guest suggests that these items are metonymic of African local culture: “I hope you don’t mind my old-world ways You know, though I have lived in this country fairly long, off and on, I like to sniff a bit of the African air somehow where’er I go” (6). As Kwamankra puts it, these works of art are not museum pieces, but examples of African culture in motion. These descriptions are perhaps not quite ekphrases, in that they do not slow the momentum of the narrative, asking the reader to pause and consider the spatial presence of the art. Instead, they are embedded in the setting, suggesting that they are equally embedded in Kwamankra’s daily life. Also embedded in the scene is a “plain oak desk, littered with written matter,” material that, although they are not flagged as specifically African, provide evidence of writing, a kind of artistic production in which Hayford will forcefully assert an African presence. The *mélange* of both markedly African and ostensibly Western material in this scene represents in microcosm the book’s overall insistence on both the specificity of African culture and its undeniable place in the modern world. This situation, which is emphatically not a paradox for Hayford, is one in which writing, specifically writing for a global audience, becomes as important a mode of African cultural production as any other.

Late in the book comes the only reference to a named, actually existing work of African art in any of the texts considered in this chapter. So fleeting that it is easily missed, it comes as Hayford is considering the changes brought to Gold Coast landscapes and cityscapes by colonization. Hayford laments the ugliness brought about by modern

commercialism: “Where once stood the palace of the King, now stands an ugly coast building with dirty blinds and a dirtier shop below” (185). Hayford remarks on the visible absence of his people’s “household gods,” but his complaints turn quickly toward a triumphant vision of resilient Ethiopianism; the gods, he asserts, are “as safe as the golden stool itself is” (185). Hayford’s reference to the “golden stool” goes by unglossed, implying that, even though his book imagines itself as circulating globally, it also addresses itself first to a local Gold Coast audience. The golden stool, as would have been well known to Hayford’s immediate audience, was the center of a 1900 British military misadventure referred to alternately as the “War of the Golden Stool,” the “Third Ashanti Expedition,” and “The Ashanti Uprising.” The conflict occurred when His Excellency Sir Frederick Mitchell Hodgson, Governor of the Gold Coast in the city of Kumasi, attempted to obtain for himself the (literal) throne of the Ashanti Empire’s monarch. He encountered fierce resistance, led by Yaa Asantewaa, queen mother of the Ejisu section of the Ashanti Empire, during which the stool was successfully hidden by the Ashanti. Its centrality is designated by presence on the Ashanti Empire’s flag. (Hayford’s ethnic group, the Fanti, is distinct from the Ashanti ethnicity, but his identification of the two groups is an unsurprising proto-nationalist move in the face of British imperialism.)⁶⁰

In his first book, *Gold Coast Native Institutions* (1903), which is straightforwardly a work of nonfiction, Hayford explains the role of the golden stool as part of the book’s larger project of recording pre-colonial Gold Coast history. His description of the stool emphasizes its embeddedness in social and political institutions:

Now, what does it mean when a native king is said to be put on, or of, the stool? What is the idea conveyed by the stool in its concrete sense upon which the King is said to sit? I have said that the King is the First Magistrate of the State, essentially the fountain of justice, and the allusion to him as sitting upon a stool bears out this principle more than anything else. For, you see, in a native state every matter is settled by the ‘bringing together of stools.’ When there is a big ‘palaver’ coming on, the people say they are going to bring together stools--*wo ri bobo ingwa*. What actually takes place at the appointed hour of the meeting is, that you observe a number of attendants carrying to the public arena a number of native stools of the pattern generally seen in public pictorial prints after a military expedition in the hinterland of the Gold Coast. Each of these stools represents an ancient house in the community, and the King’s stool would, naturally, be the most important and the most ancient stool present.⁶¹

Here, Hayford explains the stool’s role as a metonym for institutional power. In *Ethiopia Unbound*, the reference to the stool, in its very brevity, signals embeddedness at the formal level: it is “safe” in the knowledge of Gold Coast readers, so much a part of the network of cultural knowledge of which *Ethiopia Unbound* is a part that it need not be explained in that particular volume. As a crucial piece of material culture that integrates the material with the spiritual, the stool is, to adopt Olakunle George’s description of African literature, an example of “agency in motion.”⁶² Along these lines, Hayford’s definition of religion in *Ethiopia Unbound* can surely also be taken as a working

definition of the agency of art: “it is that which links back the finite to the infinite, the material to the spiritual, the temporal to the eternal” (186). To say that pieces of socially embedded African material culture became art objects in the eyes of Europeans through a process of violent appropriation and decontextualization is of course a commonplace. Less commonly realized, however, is the fact that a socially embedded or non-museal view of African artistic production was appearing, in a transnationally circulated, English-language book at the very moment of modernism’s formation. This is a contemporary expression of artistic agency, not a victimization to be rectified by the agency of late twentieth-century academics.

The most important statement about African art in *Ethiopia Unbound*, however, veers even further from the deployment, however strategic, of primitivist aesthetics: it is the book’s claim to be itself a work of art, a circulating cultural production that enacts both political and aesthetic change through its very existence. “In the name of African nationality the thinker would, through the medium of *Ethiopia Unbound*, greet members of the race everywhere throughout the world,” Hayford writes in one of the volume’s proleptic moments (167). In the process of imagining itself as entering world literature, Hayford’s work allegorizes the process of Africa’s becoming a full participant in global politics.⁶³ *Ethiopia Unbound* shows us that, if we expand our archive of the early days of modernism, we will find that African art in literature was defined as more than just sculpture that served as misappropriated inspirations for European modernists.

We also find in this work an early-twentieth-century African modernism that asserts its coevalness in a way that treats anticolonial politics, not with the irony and pessimism that we associate with a European contemporary of Hayford’s such as Conrad,

or with much postcolonial African fiction, but rather a confident and optimistic anticolonial prophecy. That this optimism can look more than a little misplaced after the calamitous twentieth century cannot be denied, nor can the fact that the specific effects that *Ethiopia Unbound* predicted for its own circulation did not take place. In regard to another “failed” African anticolonial prophecy, however, Jennifer Wenzel argues that “[a]ttending to alternative historical logics and fluid temporalities allows us to perceive in failure not finality but incompleteness.”⁶⁴ To read *Ethiopia Unbound* today, while taking its temporality seriously, is not a sentimental exercise in optimism but rather an act of protest against our current frames of analysis, which continue sometimes in spite of themselves to relegate African literature to modernity’s spatial and temporal margins.

1 D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Further citations will be given parenthetically in text.

2 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988). Marlowe’s confusion at the sight of a young African with white cloth around his neck causes him to ruminate on the difficulties of reading across a cultural divide: “‘He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck—Why? Where did he get it. Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it?’” (20-21). Later, Kurtz himself is compared to an ivory carving: “It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze,” 59.

3 Picasso denied that the painting was influenced by African masks, but scholars tend not to take this disavowal at face value. Of the vast scholarship surrounding this painting and its implications for primitivism, two works from literary critics that are relevant to the themes of my dissertation are Michael North’s discussion *The Dialect of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), especially pages 59-76, and Simon Gikandi’s “Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10.3 (2003): 455-480.

4 Susan Stanford Friedman, “Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies,” *Modernism/Modernity*. 17.3 (2010): 471-499, 483.

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- 5 Friedman, 493.
- 6 Isobel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2.
- 7 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 8 Simon Gikandi, "Introduction: Africa, Diaspora, and the Discourse of Modernity," *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (Winter 1996): 1-6, 2.
- 9 Oyekan Owomoyela, "Lost in Transit: Africa in the Trench of the Black Atlantic," *Recharting the Black Atlantic*, eds. Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi (New York: Routledge, 2008), 238-258, 239.
- 10 Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.
- 11 Ibid, 6.
- 12 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 94. Another assertion from this book provides an additional sense of what motivates my project: "At the very centre of Marxism is an extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation," 206.
- 13 With regard to art history, Rupert Richard Arrowsmith has recently argued against the "distorted view of Modernism as essentially a European invention, with comparable movements on other parts of the globe characterized as imitative of 'advanced' art and literature in Europe, or—paradoxically—as reactionary and propagandistic. The possibility of multi-directional, transnational exchange in aesthetic concepts, art-historical knowledge, and literary and artistic technique is thus discounted, played down, or at best acknowledged in tentative and misleading ways." *Modernism and the Museum: Asian, African and Pacific Art and the London Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.
- 14 Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- 15 Caroline Rooney, *African Literature, Animism, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 92.
- 16 Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), xi-xii.
- 17 Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History*, 42 (2011): 573-591, 587.
- 18 Ibid, 582.
- 19 Ibid, 583.
- 20 Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 104.
- 21 Ibid, 116; 48.
- 22 All of the essays from Fry that I discuss are collected in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920). Further citations are given parenthetically in text.
- 23 See Jacques Rancière's discussion of the modernist "aesthetic regime," in which the specificity of media are accorded particular importance, in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum 2004).
- 24 Needless to say, Fry's speculations about the possible local functions of the carvings he looks at are not necessarily accurate.
- 25 Torgovnick, 89.
- 26 Ibid, 97.

27 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön* (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1962), 95.

28 James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3. See also W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

29 Lessing, 19.

30 Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 9. Krieger's emphasis on ekphrasis as a widespread spatializing impulse is, as he and his critics point out, close in some ways to Joseph Frank's ideas about spatial form. See Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963) and his later revisions of his concept in *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

31 Krieger, 11.

32 Heffernan, 191, n 3.

33 Mitchell, *Picture*, 152.

34 Mitchell, *Picture*, 160. Mitchell's elaboration on this point bears more extensive quotation: "We think...that the visual arts are inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely; that they bring these things as gifts to language. We suppose, on the other side, that arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives are in some sense *proper* to verbal communication, that language must bring these things as a gift to visual representation. But neither of these 'gifts' is really the exclusive property of their donors: paintings can tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas; words can describe or embody static, spatial states of affairs, and achieve all of the effects of ekphrasis without any deformation of their 'natural' vocation (whatever that may be)", 160. Mitchell's point about the spatial quality of (printed) words in themselves is suggestive for what in the next section I will show to be J.E. Casely Hayford's interest in artifacts of print culture as works of material art in motion. Indeed, the interplay between the spatial and the temporal in many of the works this dissertation considers will prove far more complicated and impossible to neatly align to the verbal/visual divide than the Lessing/Krieger models allow for.

35 As Mitchell puts it, "The ambivalence about ekphrasis, then, is grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation," *Picture*, 163. Mitchell concerns himself more specifically with non-Western visual/material culture throughout his later book, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), differentiating among the fetish, the idol, and the totem.

36 Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), 183.

37 Among the many works that address Lawrence on art I have consulted Keith Alldritt, *The Visual Imagination of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), Anne Fernihough, *D.H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Robert Montgomery, *The Visionary D.H. Lawrence: Beyond Philosophy and Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Jack Stewart, *The Vital Art of D.H. Lawrence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), and Marianna

Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

38 The slippage between the physical and the material in Rupert's language is another example.

39 Stewart, 104.

40 Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 94.

41 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 31.

42 Rooney, 14.

43 *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence Vol. 1*, ed., James T. Boulton, et al., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 127.

44 Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D.H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile, 1912-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 437. Arrowsmith adds that "It is unfortunately not clear whether Lawrence followed up these new interests with a visit to the British Museum or by tracking down a copy of [Carl Einstein's] *Negerplastik*. His familiarity with avant-garde ideas regarding such work is, however, beyond question, as the 'Lawrence character' Birkin's reaction to Heseltine's carving demonstrates [...] the 'phallic cult' apparently pursued by Eptsein, Gaudier, and Gill, then, did not for Lawrence offer a satisfactory interpretation of West African sculptural aesthetics," 196.

45 Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa I: being an account of the travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the Years 1910-1912*, trans. Rudolf Blind. (New York and London: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1968). Frobenius accuses the Yoruba of an "appallingly hideous lack of all moral principle and an astonishing dearth of the ethical instinct" (106) and makes the following call for white solidarity: "Woe betide the Europeans who forget their unity of race and culture in the bush of Africa! ... Oh, Europeans, labouring on the tawny soil of dusky African, let me adjure you to hold together in friendship's bond and not to lose the memory of your race and kin!," 107.

In accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, Wole Soyinka cited Frobenius as one among several twentieth-century European "enthusiasts" of African culture who nonetheless harbored racist sentiments toward actual African people. I acknowledge that my focus on art objects as actors runs the risk of a similar privileging of things over the people who created them. Despite this, I remain convinced that the model I put forward is necessary for a full appreciation of the creative power of the artists, many of them unnamed, who individually and collectively produced both the particular works and the broader forms that are referenced in the literature discussed herein. Seeing these works and forms as nonhuman actors accords them more agency than does a model that views them as passive objects of misappropriation.

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1986/soyinka-lecture.html].

46 Frobenius, 88-89.

47 Ibid, 318.

48 Christopher Heywood has argued that "the carving itself lacks Yoruba features, resembling in its neck ornaments the figures in the Benin bronze tradition, and it [sic] its face and body, the Fang tradition," "African Art and the Work of Roger Fry and D.H. Lawrence," *Papers on African Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 111.

Whatever composite of formal features (and Lawrence's own imagination) led to the description in the novel, the influence of Frobenius's work on Yoruba art on how Lawrence *writes* about Africa is clearly central.

49 John Hollander, "The Poetics of *Ekphrasis*," *Word & Image* 4 (1988): 209-219, 209.

50 Mitchell, *Picture*, 157 n 19.

51 Krieger, 17.

52 J.E. Casely Hayford, *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2011), 9. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

53 Donald R. Wehrs, *Pre-Colonial Africa in Colonial African Narratives: From Ethiopia Unbound to Things Fall Apart, 1911-1958* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 35.

54 Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: How to Play the Game of Life* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002). For other readings of Hayford's work see Yogita Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010); Robert Fraser, *Book History Through Postcolonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), Kwaku Larbi Korang, *Writing Ghana, Imagining Africa* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

55 Ibid, 147.

56 Ibid, 147.

57 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 156.

58 Jean-Michel Rabaté *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 5.

59 Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 1. To put this another way, Hayford's book anticipates, and goes some way toward delivering on, Jameson's call for "cognitive mapping." See his *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

60 Hayford explains that "the Native State in Ashanti, as embodying the highest development thereof, since both the Fantis and the Ashantis come from the same stock, and may be regarded as cousins, if not brothers, the difference in character arising merely from their respective local environments." J.E. Casely Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions, with Thoughts upon a Healthy Imperial Policy for the Gold Coast and Ashanti* (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1970), x.

61 Ibid, 37.

62 Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

63 Hayford's vision of book-as-agent resonates with the trope of the talking book identified in African diaspora writing by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). According to Gates, this trope "argue[s] forcefully that blacks were intent on placing their individual and collective voices in the text of Western letters" (131). *Ethiopia Unbound* shows that a similar dynamic was at work along a slightly different geographical axis than the American diaspora of Gates's focus.

64 Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and*

Beyond (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Crafting Diaspora: Sculptural Affiliations in Locke, Hughes, and Senghor

In 1935, a decade after the publication of his epochal anthology *The New Negro*, Alain Locke attended an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art that would inspire his most important piece of writing on African art since that volume's appearance. The exhibit, entitled "African Negro Art," was curated by James Johnson Sweeney, then in the first year of his tenure at the museum. Sweeney's selections for this major display were made to emphasize what he called African art's "essential plastic seriousness," which he defined as its "moving dramatic qualities, eminent craftsmanship and sensibility to material, as well as to the relationship of material with form and expression."¹

Sweeney's use of the word "plastic" here was familiar to Locke. In *The New Negro* he endorsed Roger Fry's view, discussed in the previous chapter, that African sculpture displays "complete plastic freedom"—Locke's quotation of this quintessential modernist formalist attracts critical opprobrium to this day. Christopher Green usefully defines Fry's "plastic freedom" as "the ability to work fully in three dimensions, free from the planar limitations of bas-relief."² For Locke, part of the achievement of the MoMA exhibit was its emphasis on African sculpture's three-dimensionality. In his laudatory review of the show for *American Magazine of Art*, Locke describes the way in which "the museum atmosphere is completely abolished by artful spacing and an effect of outdoor setting" and "the items can be examined, as they should be, from all points of view."³

For Locke, this exhibit signaled the first mature understanding of African art to be demonstrated by an American or European institution, balancing formal appreciation with a respect for the cultural context of these objects in a way that evaded the trap of primitivist faddism.

It is significant that Locke sees some ethical and political potential in the concept of plastic form, a phrase that has often been taken as only slightly less vague, tautological, and apolitical than its modernist cousin, Clive Bell's "significant form."⁴ Locke's formalism is not surprising, of course, to the many critics who view it as nothing other than a sign of his politically compromised and Eurocentric aestheticism. On this reading, plastic form might be nothing more than an unfortunate celebration of the African art object at its most violently decontextualized, in which the freestanding sculpture on display at the Museum of Modern Art becomes a figure for the violent imperialist removal of the artifact from the cultural function in which it was embedded. It is the contention of this chapter, however, that the encounter with plasticity has a more positive potential, especially in the case of three twentieth-century Black internationalist figures whose reputations have been politically tainted by their relationship to the fallacies of modernist European primitivism: Locke; the Senegalese poet, president, and *négritude* theorist Léopold Sédar Senghor; and the early, "primitivist" incarnation of Langston Hughes.

This chapter turns to the Harlem Renaissance era in the United States, which is, alongside European primitivism, the most frequently examined point of contact between global modernism and African art. As in the case of European primitivism, the model of "contact" between modernism and an implicitly non-modern other or object can obscure African art's founding contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and African-American modernism more generally. This chapter will build on recent work by examining Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* (1925) in the full context of Locke's lifelong engagement with African art history and criticism.⁵ Although the uses of and appeals to

the plastic arts of sub-Saharan Africa in this collection have been extensively studied—and often assailed—archival evidence sheds new light on the depth of Locke’s engagement with the arts of Africa and the strength of its influence on Locke and his circle. An analysis of the treatment of African art in the contents of the anthology as well as its paratexts reveals surprising resonances between the text’s uptake of African art and broad questions of modernist form. The second part of this chapter moves from the form of the anthology to that of the lyric poem, placing work from *New Negro* contributor Langston Hughes alongside francophone poems by Senghor. Reading both of these crucial modernist forms shows not only the influence of actually existing African art works but also an investment in metaphors of sculpting and crafting that anticipates what Brent Edwards has recently called an “anti-abstractionist” view of diaspora. The writers considered in this chapter present African art, not as an immediately accessible source of authenticity for African-Americans, but as a thematic and metaphoric tool for thinking about the difficulties and possibilities of forging diasporic connections.

I. “Nobody’s Art Is Nobody’s Business”: Locke, African Art, and Global Modernism

Educator, art collector, and pragmatist philosopher Alain Locke is widely acknowledged as a senior figure in the Harlem Renaissance and also frequently critiqued for that group’s most controversial characteristics—its supposed elitist aestheticism, the allegedly naïve politics of its collusion with white (primitivist) modernists, and its ultimate “failure” as a revolutionary movement designed to combat American racism through the figure of the “New Negro.” The modern, re-imagined Black subject named in

this phrase serves as the title of Locke's most frequently discussed publication, the anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), which revised and expanded a special 1925 issue of the periodical *Survey Graphic* also edited by Locke. This volume famously collects a wide variety of original prose, poetry, and drama by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and many others alongside scholarly commentary from a multiracial group of critics including Melville Herskovits, Albert C. Barnes, and Locke himself. The volume is illustrated with art works by Winold Reiss and Aaron Douglas, as well as African-inspired illuminations. These images are reproduced in subsequent editions although there are color plates that appear only in the original 1925 edition.

The volume's striking visual component signals its concern with diasporic ties between African-Americans and the African continent. At the same time, *The New Negro*'s inclusion of the visual arts demonstrates its relationship to American and European modernism's then-lively interest in sub-Saharan African art works. That *The New Negro* represents an important moment in the story of African art's role in global modernism is uncontroversially clear. It is the contention of this chapter, however, that African art's influence on Locke and his world is broader, deeper, and less compromised than the often politically fraught accounts of Harlem Renaissance studies would have it. First, it is worthwhile to review some influential accounts of Locke's place relative to modernist and African art, many of which are quite censorious, from the classic works on Harlem by David Levering Lewis and Nathan Huggins through the present day.

Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) and Lewis's *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1989) each famously describe the work of Harlem writers during the 1920s as

comprising a kind of collective failure. In Lewis's often-cited formulation, the Harlem Renaissance was "an elitist response on the part of a tiny group of mostly second-generation, college-educated, and generally affluent Afro-Americans—a response, first, to the increasingly raw racism of the times, second, to the frightening Black Zionism of the Garveyites, and, finally, to the remote, but no less frightening, appeal of Marxism."⁶ For Lewis, Alain Locke, whom he describes as "Eurocentric to the tip of his cane," bears substantial responsibility for making the Renaissance a "cultural nationalism of the parlor" rather than an effective and responsible effort on behalf of African-American advancement.⁷ The larger debate about the success or failure of the Renaissance, or what it means to judge an artistic movement by such a standard, is of limited concern to this chapter. The specific charge of Locke's entanglement with the logic of primitivism is more relevant. African-American modernists, according to this line of critique, were placed in a double bind by the modernist imperative to upend the aesthetics of the past by becoming primitive, but could not do so because any such move would, in the eyes of the white modernist establishment, be viewed as an expression of their "primitive" nature rather than their creativity. What would be a question of making in the work of William Carlos Williams or Gertrude Stein would become a question of being in the work of Langston Hughes or Claude McKay. This is indeed a serious dilemma and there is ample evidence for its existence, but the authors addressed in this chapter anticipate and resist it by engaging the concepts of *being* and *making* not as an inescapably vicious cycle but as a creative dialectic.

Against the then-prevalent view that the Renaissance was a failure, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) by Houston A. Baker, Jr., proclaims the Renaissance

as a largely successful act of radical cultural nationalism. Baker's division of Black modernist writing into two strategies, the "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery," signals a further divide between the artistic practices of American modernist writers on either side of the color line. Baker's frequent rhetorical positioning of white modernism as an elitist and disengaged counterpart to the Harlem Renaissance writers allows him to defend Locke's work on the same terms on which it was criticized in earlier scholarship.⁸ For Baker, *The New Negro* is "an intensely successful act of national self-definition"⁹ and even an act of radical *marronage*.¹⁰ Baker posits African-American modernism as nationally oriented toward the cultural and economic advancement of Black citizens; Locke's volume, by "broadening...the field of traditional Afro-American discursive possibilities" provides the grounds for hope of national renewal.¹¹ Even as Baker's formulation seems to make a case for the political efficacy of the Harlem Renaissance by positing a bifurcation between a political African-American modernism and a disengaged white modernism, it is worth noting that this division is complicated by his locating of the political value of *The New Negro* in its formal and aesthetic qualities, its enhancement of African-American culture's "visual, auditory, and indeed, almost tactile field."¹²

Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism* (1994) and George Hutchinson's *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995) represent an influential turn away from a racially bifurcated view of the Harlem Renaissance. Both scholars position the work of Locke and his contemporaries as embedded in a field of modernism marked by cross-racial and transnational exchange and mutual influence. Hutchinson's arguments against simplistic views of *The New Negro* itself or its relationship to its broader context are

especially powerful. He points out that the multiplicity of perspectives among the anthology's contributors, as well as the volume's participation in interracial and international conversations about philosophical pragmatism and Boasian anthropology. While Hutchinson largely avoids making evaluative claims about the political effectiveness of the Harlem Renaissance, his sharpest argument—that it is “is hard to know how to respond to a critique for which the standard of success of an artistic movement is its effectiveness in ending centuries of oppression”—makes a forceful case against the harshness with which Locke and other figures have been studied.¹³ North, on the other hand, while insisting on the shaping influence of African-American culture on modernism in general, returns to the tradition of branding Locke a failure. Although North does not discuss the success or failure of the Renaissance as a whole, he singles out Locke as a false prophet of the idea that modernism could be a zone of interracial cooperation. Because Locke, at least during the nineteen-twenties, imagined cooperation between what North terms “white modernism and the Harlem movement,”¹⁴ he failed to foresee that his “blithe hope” would be disappointed by modernism's intractable primitivism, exemplified in what North sees as the catastrophically paternalistic anthology *Negro* (1936) edited by the wealthy British Communist Nancy Cunard. North offers a perspective on modernism in which African and African diaspora artists are profoundly influential but just as thoroughly victimized and unable to set the terms of their work's reception. Without denying the reach of racism into the artistic sphere, this chapter will argue that Locke was neither naïve about the racist dynamics of primitivism, but also that he was not, as North claims, utterly defeated by them.

More recent scholarship on Locke and the Harlem Renaissance follows Hutchinson in turning from fraught political debates toward formal analysis, although Locke remains a target of censorious commentary throughout much of this work. Sieglinde Lemke's *Primitivist Modernism* (1998) and Rachel Farebrother's *The Collage Aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance* (2009) each provide a number of careful readings of the relationships between writings in *The New Negro* as well as their many disjunctions and conjunctions with the volume's visual paratexts and overall structure. Lemke furthers the argument against seeing American modernism in terms of racial boundaries, but, in a reversal of the earliest accusations against Locke, accuses him of being *too* essentialist: "Locke seems to want to have it both ways: the Negro claim to the power of primitivist modernism will be both purely formal ... and based on birthright."¹⁵ Farebrother, meanwhile, takes Locke to task for political hypocrisy, identifying a contradiction between his democratic politics and his exercise of editorial control. Because Locke "frames these voices in such a way as to accentuate certain aspects of African American culture, while relegating others to the background,"¹⁶ his anthology "lacks vibrancy."¹⁷ In the wake of this onslaught, it is almost surprising to read Jeremy Braddock's claim in *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (2012) that *The New Negro* "is the most important and influential anthology of the modernist period, irrespective of race, nationality, or aesthetic."¹⁸ Braddock's formal and materialist analysis of the anthology argues for its importance as a mode of collection, in support of his argument that anthologies and art collections in museums and galleries constitute a modernist form of underappreciated importance.

This brief genealogy of selected moments in the history of Locke scholarship reveals a complicated confluence of intellectual discussions, most of them united by a sense that studying the Harlem Renaissance is a politically and ethically high-stakes endeavor. No doubt it is this, for many reasons related to the history (and present) of racism in the United States, and more specifically due the long struggle to establish the academic study of African-American literature and culture institutionally, a struggle in which several of the above-discussed scholars played crucial roles. Without denying the sensitivities that have led to Locke's being criticized from so many angles, however, this chapter will strategically bracket *some* of the guiding concerns of African-American studies for two related reasons, both of which have their own ethico-political drives. First, this chapter will approach Locke's contribution to the Harlem Renaissance from an African studies, as opposed to American, African-American, or even "Black Atlantic," perspective. Second, the chapter will, despite the many criticisms to which Locke and *The New Negro* have been demonstrated to be vulnerable, adopt a stance toward Locke that opposes itself toward what has been at times in itself an ethically problematic devaluation of his creative agency, as well as his extraordinary knowledge of African art history and much else. The failure to account for Locke's commitment to learning from the arts of sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, represents a further failure to appreciate the weight of that art's influence, via Locke and others, on modernism in general.

The most widely read of Locke's many writings on African art is his essay "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," which appears in *The New Negro*. A growing body of scholarship addresses this influential piece in its relationship to questions of diaspora, Harlem aesthetics, and other modernist formal and political conversations. The very fact

that Locke locates West Africa as a source of diasporic connection for African-Americans represents in itself a historically important break from appeals to Ethiopia and Egypt as the primary modes of Black internationalist stances toward Africa. This treatment of Locke's African arts writing will take this crucial essay as its starting point, but will also look backward and forward to place it in the entirety of Locke's career as a scholar of African art.

As was the case with the Roger Fry and D.H. Lawrence texts examined in the previous chapter, the potentially distorting tradition of critical controversy surrounding "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts" necessitates a close, and at least initially more descriptive than prescriptive, look anew at the precise language of the text itself. The essay begins by positing a general distinction between African-American and African artistic production, aligning the former with music and performance and the latter with "plastic and craft arts" (254). Locke asserts that Africa is "one of the great fountain sources of the arts of decoration and design" (254). His understanding of the relationship between African and African-American art is complex if not slippery: on the one hand, there is "little evidence of any direct connection of the American Negro with his ancestral arts," but on the other hand Locke argues that "the American Negro brought over as an emotional inheritance a deep-seated aesthetic endowment" (254). Locke's rhetorical strategy involves generalization about both ends of the Africa/United States binary that he assumes. His description of a singular "American Negro" and a singular African "aesthetic endowment," related through what he describes as single middle passage, stands in apparent tension with Locke's pedagogical and philosophical commitment to pluralism, not to mention his detailed knowledge of the differences among art traditions

within sub-Saharan Africa. At the very least, though, this founding binary lays the predicate for Locke's effort, in this particular essay, to address diasporic aesthetic affinities in broadly formal terms. The result of his heuristic, singular African artist's journey to the United States is described, not in political terms, but as the creation of "strange new forms" (254).

Race, however, quickly reasserts itself in the essay. Locke negotiates its relation to form through the concept of inheritance. He begins by suggesting a complete inversion of formal tendencies between African and African-American aesthetics, what he calls a "curious reversal of emotional temper and attitude" (254). While he defines African art as "rigid, controlled, disciplined, abstract, heavily conventionalized," what he terms the "Aframerican" aesthetic is marked by "free, exuberant, emotional, sentimental and human" qualities (254). This division of formal qualities builds on the original binary between Africa and America, making the opposition even more starkly schematic. This distillation suggests a pedagogic goal, which Locke soon reveals. The essay, reflecting the explicit goals of the anthology that contains it, wants to prove that the Negro is "not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance" (256). The statement introduces a paradox into Locke's logic of diasporic aesthetic filiation. If African art has provided African-American artists with an inheritance, it is, according to Locke's narrative, one that has been ignored or rejected by its heirs. It thus cannot be a legacy that inheres in raced bodies as it might in a strictly essentialist understanding. At the same time, though, racial identification seems to be at least part of the grounds for the renewed alliance between African-American artists and African art traditions—or, to put it another way, a belated claim of inheritance. "There is the possibility that the sensitive artistic mind of

the American Negro, stimulated by a cultural pride and interest, will receive from African art a profound and galvanizing influence,” Locke writes, leaving no doubt that it is a possibility the fulfillment of which he looks forward to eagerly (256). The following sentence underlines the complexity, if not outright internal contradictoriness, of Locke’s vision of a diasporic turn toward African aesthetic traditions: “The legacy is there at least, with prospects of a rich yield” (256). Race is proffered as the occasion of the aesthetic relationship, but the language emphasizes an opportunity to be consciously chosen rather than an inherent or essential identity.

One explanation is the forceful presence of then-current European modernist aesthetics in Locke’s essay, a source of much of the critical opprobrium that has been directed toward “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” and *The New Negro*. The above-cited language from the essay’s opening has already revealed an affinity with the vocabulary of the British formalism of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, as well as their American counterpart, Locke’s collaborator Albert C. Barnes, in its emphasis on such terms as “plasticity,” “craft,” and “decoration.” As the essay goes on, this affinity becomes more emphatic. Locke embraces Fry’s concept of African art as a paragon of “complete plastic freedom,” quoting at length from the Fry essays discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation (258-260). In commenting on the European uptake of sub-Saharan aesthetics, Locke seems to anticipate and oppose readings of this European modernist interest as primitivist faddism: “The importance of these absorptions of African and Negro material by all of the major forms of contemporary art, some of them independently of any transfer that might be dismissed as a mere contagion of fad or vogue, is striking, and ought to be considered as a quite unanimous verdict of the modern creative mind upon the values,

actual and potential, of this yet unexhausted reservoir of art material” (261-262). Cultural appropriation does not pose a problem here. Indeed, the global reception of African art by “the modern creative mind”—the phrase is another of this pluralist thinker’s oddly singularizing constructions—is presented as justifying and amplifying the essay’s assertion of African art’s intrinsic value.

The category of the “modern creative mind” becomes a third term that bears a complex and overlapping relationship to the categories of African and African-American art, one that further complicates how the concept of inheritance operates in the essay. Locke writes that “African sculpture has been for contemporary European painting and sculpture just such a mine of fresh *motifs*, just such a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression, and surely, once known and appreciated, this art can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants, bound to it by a sense of direct cultural kinship, than upon those who inherit by tradition only, and through the channels of an exotic curiosity and interest” (256). The argument here puts forward two, or maybe three, lines of filiation between African art traditions and extra-African production. First, there is the purely formal and voluntary relation between African aesthetics and global modernism, which is presented as European and white even as the essay and the anthology more generally assert the place of African and African-American creators in global modernism. The motifs of African art are detachable and available to cross-cultural mining. (For the moment, we will follow Locke in bracketing the political and ethical concerns that attend this particular relationship.) Alongside this logic of conscious formal borrowing, however, Locke posits a line of filiation flowing Africa to its diaspora based on racial inheritance. In a conflation of pre-and post-Boasian anthropological registers, Locke

describes this relationship as based both on “blood” and on cultural kinship. And yet, as the essay has already acknowledged, kinship, whether genetic or cultural, has not in itself yielded aesthetic results among African-American visual artists. Thus, in what might be seen as a third, and far from straight, line of (potential) filiation, African aesthetic principles make their way to the African-American art world by way of European modernism, or, if not precisely routed through Europe, it is Europe that provides the catalyst for the awakening of the dormant Africa-to-diaspora vector. In contrast to current modernist literary studies, in which Europe tends to maintain its status as the driver of innovation, African-American output receives a substantial amount of attention, and African work is seen as belated to the point of near-abjection, Locke asserts the germinal agency of African art, while positioning African-American artists at the belated end of the continuum.

This move partially explains and perhaps to some extent justifies the ongoing critical discomfort with how Locke thinks about the African diaspora. For all of the ambiguity of Locke’s attempt to discuss the imbrication of racial politics and aesthetics, however, it is plain at several points in the essay that a desire to confront racism motivates his argument. Locke makes this clear in writing, “Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid. And all vital art discovers beauty and opens our eyes to that which previously we could not see” (264). Locke’s belief in the power of aesthetic expression may be debatable, but his investment in the political potential of art makes sense on its own terms. For Locke, modernist experimentation’s political potency lies in its opposition to stereotype. He posits a homology between the rejection of racial stereotypes and the refusal of traditional artistic

forms. In discussing the German artist Winold Reiss—and implicitly defending the pride of place given to Reiss in the anthology's overall design—Locke makes the connection explicit:

The work of Winold Reiss...has supplied the main illustrative material for this volume has been deliberately conceived and executed as a path-breaking guide and encouragement to this new foray of the younger Negro artists. In idiom, technical treatment and objective social angle, it is a bold iconoclastic break with the current traditions that have grown up about the Negro subject in American art. It is not mean to dictate a style to the young Negro artist, but to point the lesson that contemporary European art has already learned—that any vital artistic expression of the Negro theme and subject in art must break through the stereotypes to a new style, a distinctive fresh technique, and some sort of characteristic idiom. (266-267)

Locke's discussion of Reiss repeats the belated positioning of African-American art relative to European modernism, but it does so on the grounds that African art provides a temporally evergreen source of formal inspiration. While on the one hand this conception positions Africa as problematically outside of time, it also challenges the linear chronology of innovation that the passage seems in other places to accept.

Locke's moves from generalizations to specific examples does not dissipate the essay's logical tension between a racially or culturally essentialist understanding of African-American art and one that is both formal and global. Locke praises the African-American artists Meta Warrick Fuller, Charles Keene, and Aaron Douglas for moving

toward “a local and a radically representative tradition” (266). But, again, this cultivation of the local is achieved through a detour to what Locke understands as Africa’s more formal and decorative art world, not what he conceives of us as the music and performance-based folk culture of Black America. “The African spirit,” he writes “is at its best in abstract decorative forms. Design, and to a lesser degree, color, are its original *fortes*” (267). Locke, however, makes an additional rhetorical shift in which the opposed formal tendencies of Africa and the United States give way to a claim of cultural unity. He defines abstract African design as the “aspect of *the* folk tradition...[the] slumbering gift of *the* folk temperament that most needs reachievement and re-expression” (267; emphasis added). Locke imagines the activation of diasporic as occurring through deliberate aesthetic affiliation.

In the conclusion of the essay, Locke refers by name to the particular samples of sub-Saharan art with which the essay has been illustrated. It is in fact tempting to refer to these black-and-white plates as decorations rather than illustrations, both to echo Locke’s language and because their relationship to the essay frequently seems more discontinuous than illustrative or exemplary. Locke mentions specific ethnic groups, which have already appeared as illustrations, for the first time in the final peroration: “So that if even the present vogue of African art should pass, and the bronzes of Benin and the fine sculptures of Gabon and Baoule, and the superb designs of the Bushongo should again become mere items of exotic curiosity, for the Negro artist they ought still to have the import and influence of classics in whatever art expression is consciously and representatively racial” (266). Until this point, the art of these ethnic groups has appeared in illustrations inserted into the text, sometimes taking up approximately half of a page

between paragraphs and in other cases filling an entire page. The illustrations are photographs of art objects, generally masks, framed starkly both within the photographs and upon the page of the anthology. The first illustration, a photograph of a Bushongo mask, appears against a black background in a vertical image that is framed by white space on either side of it. The next image, which is labeled “Soudan-Niger,” appears alone on a full page as a cutout, suspended against an expanse of white space. All of the images feature terse indications of ethnic provenance beneath them, except for the final photograph, a Benin bronze that appears without label. The immediate effect of the essay’s verbal-visual balance seems to be juxtaposition if not outright disjunction.

In his analysis of *The New Negro*’s “bibliographic code,” Jeremy Braddock emphasizes the influence of the Barnes Foundation’s gallery space on the anthology’s overall design.¹⁹ Braddock describes the effect of this layout as being “possessed of a modernist logic that depicted all of its objects—from the texts by contemporary writers to the paintings and drawing to the folklore and historical documents—as existing in an undifferentiated synchronic present, emptied of its historical value.”²⁰ Nonetheless, Braddock sees this formal arrangement as maintaining some historical and political edge. The flattening collection of decontextualized fragments, Braddock writes, “did not evacuate the historical value of the objects, precisely because these objects were unavoidable evidence of a fragmentary unwritten, or miswritten, history.”²¹ Just as Braddock locates in the anthology’s modernist design aesthetic an implicit commitment to the weight of African and African-American *history*, I argue that the design of “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” supplements and refines our understanding of Locke’s political commitment to African diaspora’s *future*.

That the essay itself presents an overlapping, and somewhat uneasy and logically strained, view of the relationship between an essentialist understanding of diasporic belonging and a diaspora of voluntary affiliation has been made apparent enough. The arrangement of photographs within the essay does not resolve this contradiction, but it offers a way of holding Locke's conceptual poles in tension more clearly. In their juxtaposition to the essay's text, these starkly presented black-and-white plates suggest at the outset a sharp disjunction between image and text, implying a further disjunction between the American and sub-Saharan worlds that the text seeks to ally. The art objects all depict human or humanoid faces, as opposed to the tools, furniture, and animal images that, as Locke well knew, also figure heavily in African art. The eyes of these carvings seem to stare, not quite at the reader and not quite at the text, with a silent impassivity that threatens to place ironic distance between themselves and the words that describe them. This disconnect is heightened by what is until its closing paragraph the generality with which it addresses them, eliding the specific provenances that are nonetheless emblazoned in capitals underneath them. On this reading, Locke's braiding of essentialist and formalist visions of diaspora, and the hypotactic prose style that achieves and reflects this braiding, is subverted, perhaps fatally, by a modernist logic of parataxis at the visual level. The carvings, though flattened into photographs and visually suspended in white page-space, the very blankness of which seems to figure their violent de-contextualization, nonetheless silently assert their impenetrability to the text that might appropriate them, maybe even mocking the attempt to do so.

Something like this dynamic is indeed at work between the pictures and text, and stopping with this reading would resonate nicely with Braddock's convincing argument

about the overall function of modernist design aesthetics throughout the anthology. (Indeed, the cut-out images of African-style masks that appear beneath poems and other entries throughout the anthology have the same paratactic effect, perhaps an even stronger one in that they appear next to or beneath texts that do not take them as their theme in the way that “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” does.) But this reading accounts for only part of the essay’s verbal-visual interchange. Whereas the strict paratactic reading proffered above emphasizes the *flat* presence of the images as measured against Locke’s hypotactic, and the overarchingly *spatial* nature of this juxtaposition, the pages of the essay feature a countervailing interest in the *plasticity* of the carvings and in the *temporal* relationship between the illustrations and the text. Locke’s interest in the “plastic freedom” of African art is, as we have seen, strongly held. Although flat and frontal in their presentation on first glance, the photographs, most explicitly the sculptures labeled “Dahomey” (260) and “Congo Portrait Statue” (263) capture enough play of shadow and light on the sculptural surface to assert the three-dimensionality of the carvings. Not only do these photographs “round out” the pages’ visual style, softening what seems like a more frontal and hieratic design in some of the other plates, they cause the carvings to appear to regard, if not read, the opposing text on the facing page. The angling of the statues that captures their plastic form also brings them into a relational position with regard to the text.

The spatial arrangement implicitly posits the aesthetic realm as a legitimate and enabling ground for diasporic exchange. Besides the spatial positioning of image and text, there is, as the essay goes on, an increasingly clear temporal relation between the photographs and Locke’s argument. Although the essay does not address the

photographs specifically until its conclusion, the trajectory of its argument is accompanied by an accumulation of images. In its visual presentation on the page, then, the essay performs the act of collecting art objects. The text, meanwhile, demonstrates what is to be learned by such an act of collection. These dual tracks converge in the piece's closing peroration, when the provenances of the art works that have been pictured all along finally receive explicit mention in the text. In beginning to make a claim for the "fine sculptures of Gabon and Baoule, and the superb designs of the Bushongo" (266), Locke brings his essay and its illustrations together, adumbrating a kind of shared African art collection as a means of imagining diasporic community. "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," while refraining from spelling out exactly what the African arts legacy will mean to African-American inheritors, enacts on the temporal axis a linear progression toward a new artistic union of American art with African forms. At the same time, on the spatial axis, the essay's visual design witnesses the gaps between its diasporic claims and the autonomy of the art objects pictured. In combining both of these axes Locke's work does significant justice to both diversity and the possibility of certain kinds of unity.

Of course, none of this undoes the fact that, as in the case of the criticism of Roger Fry and the ekphrastic fiction of D.H. Lawrence discussed in the previous chapter, Locke's writing on African art is full of contradictions around the concepts of primitivity and modernity. It is vulnerable to ideological critique on this score, as volubly demonstrated by John C. Charles in one of the most recent scholarly works to focus specifically on Locke's relationship to Africa. Charles reads "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," despite its critical distance from the phenomenon of primitivism, as

congruent with European primitivism at its most colonizing. He finds Locke guilty of “echoing...Western appropriations of African culture” using Africa to “bolster the (American) New Negro’s sense of pride, power, and prestige,” and commodifying African culture to “shore up the cultural and political position of the African American.”²² He finds in Locke’s formal approach to African art objects a willful ignorance of actual African people: “there is no African voice, no African subjectivity, no African epistemology.”²³ Charles’s multipronged case against Locke echoes many of the earlier criticisms of the politics of the Harlem Renaissance’s focus on the aesthetic, but from a more postcolonial perspective that emphasizes Locke’s appropriation of African art. Locke is indeed, from this perspective, vulnerable to some of these charges, and Charles is correct to oppose a too-easy assumption of commonality between Africa and its diaspora, although Locke’s complex view of diaspora anticipates him in this regard.

Charles raises important issues, and yet it is difficult to ignore that critiques such as this one have even less to say about Africa than the works that they assail. It is clear that “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” neither provides nor seeks to provide a substantial introduction to the arts of Africa in their social contexts. As, however, a semi-prophetic attempt to catalyze a new kind of cultural affiliation, it achieves, as the above reading has argued, a balance between unity and difference in its argument and its visual presentation. This cannot erase the problems with Locke’s uneasy relation to primitivism, but at the very least it demonstrates that Locke was not ethically careless or imperialist in his invocation of African arts. (Indeed, from another angle of postcolonial critique, Charles’s call for the representation of “African subjectivity” is suspect in ways that

Locke's implicit respect for alterity is not.) Furthermore, the lack of resolution between the various conceptual tensions at work in Locke's essay can, and should, be taken in the spirit of pragmatist pedagogy for which Locke was known: as refusing certainty to invite further study. This is precisely what Locke engaged in before, during, and after *The New Negro*'s production. "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," which plays an introductory role in a large and far-reaching anthology does indeed have its limitations, overstated though these have been by Locke's harsher critics. Locke's other writings on African art, which this chapter will now turn to, reveal the full extent of Locke's engagement with sub-Saharan arts and the theoretical and ethical issues that attend their study. These writings offer rejoinders to two specific and oft-repeated charges against their author. They show that Locke, even prior to the publication of *The New Negro*, was critically aware of potential problems with the African diaspora's cultural relationship to European modernism, not a naïve believer in interracial modernism as a panacea. They reveal, as well, an increasingly deep and geographically detailed knowledge of art history across the sub-Saharan region, a more profound engagement than is made totally apparent Locke's use of strategic generalization in *The New Negro*.

In "A Note on African Art," an article that was published in *Opportunity* in 1924 and that served as a template a "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," Locke thoughtfully frames his discussion of African art against the backdrop of European primitivist interest in it. Here, he includes more discussion of then-contemporary trends in international modernism than he chose to in the later and better-known anthology version of the piece. In fact, Locke's very framing of the article confronts the problems raised by primitivism: "Having passed...through a period of neglect and disesteem during which it was regarded

as crude, bizarre, and primitive, African art is now in danger of another sort of misconception, that of being taken up as an exotic fad and a fashionable amateurish interest. Its chief need is to be studied and interpreted rather than to be praised or exploited” (131). These sentences anticipate the concerns of late-twentieth-century anti-primitivist revisionists, even though they would sometimes take Locke as one of their targets. Locke exhibits sensitivity to the threat of primitivist exploitation of African art. Beyond that, he warns against praising this body of art at the expense of studying and interpreting it. If “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” seems to violate this last admonition, “A Note on African Art” suggests that it was due to the anthology’s celebratory occasion rather than the signal of a more deeply primitivist enthusiasm on Locke’s part. Locke’s understanding of the word “primitive” is clarified in this piece as well. He does not in fact ascribe primitiveness to the African art at issue. On the contrary, the following makes clear his distinction between Locke’s view and the main narrative of European modernist primitivism:

Perhaps the most important effect of interpretations like these is to break down the invidious distinction between art with a capital A for European forms of expression and ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’ art for the art expressions of other peoples. Technically speaking an art is primitive in any phase before it has mastered its idiom of expression, and classic when it has arrived at maturity and before it has begun to decline. Similarly art is exotic with relation only to its relative incommensurability with other cultures, in influencing them at all vitally it ceases to be exotic. From this we can see what misnomers these terms really are when applied to all

phases of African art. Eventually we will come to realize that art is universally organic, and then for the first time scientifically absolute principles of art appreciation will have been achieved. (133-134)

This passage provides strong evidence for the distinction between Locke and primitivism proper. Locke soundly rejects the idea that African art is developmentally behind the art of Europe. To be sure, Locke's idea that art follows a primitive-classical-decadent cycle is a deservedly outmoded product of its time, but as an understanding of artistic development and decline it posits no theory of racial or ethnic development; it is in fact tempting to speculate that Locke deploys this artistic cycle in part for its rhetorical force in providing a distinct alternative to a racialist stadial theory.

Locke does, however, echo the European primitivist notion that Western art was in a state of decline prior to its investment in non-Western aesthetics. The history of this aspect of modernism is dealt with more specifically here than in *The New Negro*; in his identification of the French artist Paul Guillaume as the pioneer of Europe's interest in African art, Locke writes, "The discovery of African art happened to come at time when there was a marked sterility in certain forms of expression in European plastic art, due to generations of inbreeding of idiom and style [...] African images had been previously dismissed as crude attempts at realistic representation" (132). On this point, Locke's position is indeed similar to that of D.H. Lawrence, but this negative statement about European decadence, in the context of Locke's larger promotion of African art—specifically his promotion of *the act of learning about African art*—has a far more pedagogical and analytic cast than Lawrence's psychosexual vitalism. More importantly, the passage displays a critical and historically specific understanding of

modernism, which was then, needless to say, a contemporary and developing phenomenon.

In a review essay from *Survey Graphic* entitled “Art Lessons from the Congo” (1927), Locke further elaborates his understanding of global modernism during its formative years.²⁴ Far from exhibiting a blind faith in the possibility of transnational modernism, as critics such as North have charged, Locke proffers an alternative aesthetics and ethics of global modernism in this article. Beyond the emphasis on formal influence that characterized the above-cited essays, Locke cites the “lessons” of Congo art as bearing a political and ethical force that complements Locke’s democratic and pragmatist modernism. African “art theory”—Locke’s phrase highlights the agency African artists and craftsmen—promises to recast society’s conception of “art in relation to life” (137). This new relation would entail “an art that is native, healthy, useful as well as ornamental and integral with life, as contrasted with an art that is artificial, borrowed, non-utilitarian, and the exclusive product and possession of cliques and coteries” (137). Both sides of this equation are undeniably modernist. Locke’s complaint about the elitism of cliques and coteries is a familiar anti-modernist charge, although one that is ignored by scholars such as David Levering Lewis who see Locke as himself the quintessence of modernist elitism. On the other hand, his promotion of design and its role in everyday life resonates with other American pragmatists as well as the design theories of Fry’s Bloomsbury circle. In fact, Locke’s sentence can nearly be said to anticipate in miniature the trajectory of modernist studies in the humanities across from the high modernist age to the present in that it posits the rejection of modernism as conservative and elitist while

at the same time modeling the expanded definition of modernism that would lead to its revival around the turn of the twenty-first century.

Locke's embrace of art's role in its sociopolitical context does not eschew the lively interest in plastic form that marked his earliest art criticism, as is made clear in his long review of the 1935 exhibit of African art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, entitled "African Art: Classic Style."²⁵ This celebratory review hails the exhibit as allowing, through its highly selective culling from a range of art traditions, a mature perspective on Africa's place in world. In so doing it offers a partial revision of Locke's own stance. Locke frames the article as he does many of his previous essays on African art: "Even to those who have known and appreciated it, African art has been seen through a glass darkly—either as exotic and alien or as the inspiration and source of contemporary modernism" (149). Yet again, Locke demonstrates his critical distance from primitivism and his self-conscious awareness of modernism as a complicated, international formation. This time, however, Locke draws a newly bold line between global modernism and the sub-Saharan art tradition. The MoMA exhibit, Locke writes, shows that "instead of a heightened expression of this plastic idiom, we have in modernist art a dilution of [African art's] primitive strength and its classic simplicity" (149). In contrast to "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," Locke insists here on the difference between European modernism and African art. "Apart from texture and feel," he writes, "I fancy there can be little appreciation of it in anything approaching native terms" (152).

Locke makes explicit the cultural gap between African and Western art that was hinted at in the paratactic visual composition of "Legacy." But at the same time this later

essay reacts against the lack of geographic and ethnic specificity within Africa that was part of the earlier essay's alluring generality. Locke cites the organization of the MoMA exhibit as along geographic lines as the proper approach, a belief which is made even more clear in a proposed syllabus for an African art history course which remains among his papers.²⁶ What remains consistent, however, across Locke's writing on African art is a commitment to plasticity, to the sculptural as a formal quality that bears surprising ethical import. On one level, this attraction to plasticity suggests a conventionally modernist belief in the art object as autonomous and autotelic. To view in such a way the African art object, violently removed from its social function, seems to compound the usual political problems with such modernist formalism: to view or imagine the art object from all sides, as in a museum setting, is only to compound the political and ethical problems raised by modernist formalism in general. For Locke, though, the problem with the (European) modernist understanding of African sculpture is not that has too great an investment in sculptural plasticity, but that it is not plastic enough. "The modern artist, as a sophisticate, was always working with the idea of authorship and a technically formal idea of expressing an aesthetic," he writes. "The native African sculptor, forgetful of self and fully projected into the idea, was always working in a complete fusion with the art object" (151).

Locke's conception here may not fully account for the social and historical context of African art objects, but he achieves a formalist appreciation that respects the agency of artists that is distinct from a Western individualist notion of author-as-genius. Locke manipulates Fry's notion of plastic freedom, turning it from a way of imagining access to pure form to a way of learning about African art while allowing it some level of

alterity. His description of the MoMA exhibit, in which “the museum atmosphere is completely abolished by artful spacing and an effect of outdoor setting” and “the items can be examined, as they should be, from all points of view” (153) exemplifies his belief in plastic form’s ability to create a pedagogical space that counters conventional museal objectification. Presenting the sculpture in such relief that they can the reviewers can move among them and view them from all angles disrupts the primacy of the visual, making room for the tactile: “African art,” Locke reminds the reader, “is a sculptural art basically, and in addition—something which we have almost completely lost—a tactual art” (153).

Despite the difference in emphasis between Locke’s review of the MoMA exhibit and “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” all of Locke’s writing on the subject strives toward this use of plastic form as a springboard toward cross-cultural education and diasporic affiliation. The full import of this formal investment may be only implicit and incipient in *The New Negro*, but the presence of photographs of African sculpture on their pages, however shallowly treated they may be in the text, signals an opening toward further study, as well as an openness toward recognizing the possibility of unassimilable difference.²⁷ Its stark visual parataxis is not merely for the purposes of style, but a visual harbinger of the aesthetics and ethics of plasticity that are more fully theorized in the 1935 exhibit review. If that later review seems less hopeful about the possibility of understanding and identity between Africa and its diaspora, it is nonetheless more precise in its vision of how an encounter with the art object could ground the creation of diasporic relations. In a 1939 *Opportunity* article entitled “Advance on the Art Front,” Locke argues that “Art belongs where it is claimed most or where it functions best

[...]Art doesn't die of labels, but only of neglect—for nobody's art is nobody's business."²⁸

II. The Lyric and the Mask: Hughes, Senghor, and the Diasporic Art Object

Locke is not the only Harlem Renaissance writer whose contributions to *The New Negro* treat Africa with less apparent depth than would his later engagements with the continent. Langston Hughes, whose interactions with African writers during the independence struggle in the middle of the twentieth century are well documented, makes reference to African culture in several of the important poems which appear in *The New Negro*. Like Locke's 1920s writing, Hughes's work in *The New Negro*, and other poems from that era anthologized in *The Weary Blues* (1926), have been roundly criticized for their complicity with European primitivism. Also like Locke, Hughes himself moved away from his early approach to writing about African culture, going further than Locke in direct political engagement, both during Hughes's 1930s tenure as a radical Communist and in his mid-century phase as a pan-African internationalist who was in close touch with African writers and activists, particularly those associated with *Drum* magazine in South Africa.²⁹ This narrative of Hughes's progression of modernist primitivism to political engagement is, however, complicated by an examination of the place of art and material culture in Hughes's poetry about Africa. In doing so, it provides, through its resonances with the poetry of the Senegalese *négritude* writer and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor, a new way of understanding the place of the plastic arts in the anglophone and francophone diasporic imaginary.

In the "Poetry" section of *The New Negro*, Hughes appears alongside Countée Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson,

Anne Spencer, Angeline Grimke, and Lewis Alexander. The anthologized poems, some of them appearing in different versions than those that would later become famous, include “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “An Earth Song” and “I Too”; the poems “Jazzonia” and “Nude Young Dancer” appear in the “Music” section of the anthology alongside prose fiction, nonfiction, and musical transcription. The placement of these last two poems in the music section is appropriate in that it anticipates the role that Hughes will assume as the great poet of the blues, but attention to Hughes’s early poems in light of their relationship to Locke’s discussion of visuality and plasticity will provide a new way of reckoning with the problem of their sentimental exoticism.

Hughes’s allusions to Africa in his *New Negro* poems are unlike Locke’s analysis of African forms in “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts.” Where Locke turns the reader’s attention to contours, lines, and shapes with an emphasis on decorative and abstract qualities of African design, Hughes’s poetic appeals to Africa involve metaphors of flow rather than of sculptural solidity. The flows of sound, temperature, and water dominate in these poems: the heat of the African climate, and the traveling sound of music performed on the tom-tom, and the flow of rivers on either side of the Black Atlantic. Where these metaphors appear to work in the service of a politically affirmative diasporic claim, as in the reference to the Congo in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” it contributes to one of the century’s most famous and widely anthologized lyrics. When, as in several of the lesser-known Hughes poems included in *The New Negro*, these metaphors present a melancholy and sentimental view of an idealized African past, they have received critical scorn from their own day to the present. Of all of Hughes’s *New Negro* poems, “Our Land” offers perhaps the most sentimentally exotic portrait of Africa. Although it does not name the

continent, or, for that matter, the race or location of its speaker, it is clear enough that the poem is a lament based on an obvious binary of “primitive” African warmth versus the “coldness” of Western civilization. It reads, in its entirety:

We should have a land of sun,
Of gorgeous sun,
And a land of fragrant water
Where the twilight
Is a soft bandanna handkerchief
Of rose and gold,
And not this land where life is cold.

We should have a land of trees,
Of tall thick trees
Bowed down with chattering parrots
Brilliant as the day,
And not this land where birds are grey.

Ah, we should have a land of joy,
Of love and joy and wine and song,
And not this land where joy is wrong.³⁰

Sandwiched as it is in the anthology between the angry demystification of minstrelsy in “Minstrel Man” and the epochal claim that “I, too, sing America,” “Our Land” seems notable not only for its exoticism but for its implicit defeatism. In its generality and geographical determinism, the poem seems to offer primitivist imagery of multicolored flora and fauna and tropical warmth as the extent of the African-American’s cultural heritage. The pathos of the poem is driven by a claim of social and environmental incompatibility between the African American and the United States. The implications could not be more different from either Hughes’s more political poetry or Locke’s vision in *The New Negro* of art as a potential ground of diasporic learning and making. George Hutchison, in writing disapprovingly about a similar poem which will be discussed below, notes that “one does not find another poem of this sort in Hughes’s corpus after

The Weary Blues ... Hughes would never return to the manner of his early stereotypical African ‘tom-tom’ songs of wistful escape.”³¹ The trajectory of Hughes’s post-Harlem Renaissance poetry makes it clear that he would have agreed with Hutchinson’s negative assessment.

Despite this, Hughes’s writing about African during the nineteen-twenties is less removed from Locke’s formalist/creative perspective on diaspora than its appearance in Locke’s anthology suggests. The version of “Our Land” that appears in *The Weary Blues*, as well as an additional poem, reveal an attention to visuality and materiality that reframes the exoticism that appears in Hughes’s African references in *The New Negro*, in ways that would in fact have been quite appropriate to the anthology. The edited version of “Our Land” concludes with an additional two lines—“Oh, sweet away! / Ah, my beloved one, away!”³² More importantly, it is retitled “Our Land – Poem for a Decorative Panel.” The addition of this short subtitle radically reframes the poem. What looks in *The New Negro* like a sentimental lament, once framed as existing “for” a decorative panel, becomes something that maintains much more critical distance from the exotic visuality that it trades in.

The crucial word “for” in the title can be taken in at least two ways. On the one hand, it suggests that the poem is a supplement to a decorative panel, something to be read alongside it and perhaps physically appended to this imagined decorative piece. On the other hand, the poem might be “for” a decorative panel in the sense of being addressed to it, placing it in the tradition of poetic apostrophes to art objects, including Senghor’s poetic addresses to masks (which will be discussed below). In either case, the new title places questions of medium and materiality squarely on the agenda. The

addition of a “decorative panel” to the world of the poem does not just raise artisanal craft as a general theme; the phrase “for a decorative panel” defines both panel and poem as deliberate, intention-bearing creations. This recasts the logic of the 1925 edition of the poem, in which the mismatch between essentialist “African” qualities and non-African settings seems deterministic and politically impotent. In the second edition, the exotic images in the poem are understood *as images*, images that are to be created, framed, and manipulated according to an artistic intent. In this light, the repetition of the word “should” in the poem takes on new resonance. The poem does not, after all, say “we should *have had* a land of sun, of trees, of joy,” it says “we should have,” although the lament-like tone of the lyric obscures the present tense. Once the poem’s words are read as existing *for* a decorative panel, its claims about what we “should” have begin to sound like claims about what one can or should put on an art object. By extension, like Locke’s identification of the aesthetic sphere as providing a perspective on the creative dimensions of diasporic consciousness, not the essentialist dimensions within which the shorter version of lyric appears stuck. (On this reading, though, the differences between Hughes and Locke remain telling: Hughes’s imagery of flows is in some ways a useful corrective to Locke’s classicism, which to some extent obscures African art’s embeddedness in ritual and performance.)

A second poem from *The Weary Blues*, which was not anthologized in *The New Negro*, bears a similarly constructed title, one that goes even further toward self-explicating what has been too easily taken as Hughes’s naïve flirtation with “primitivist” modernism. Entitled, “Poem--for the portrait of an African boy after the manner of

Gauguin,” it is the lyric whose closing Hutchinson identifies as the nadir of Hughes’s primitivist phase:

All the tom-toms of the jungles beat in my blood,
 And all the wild hot moons of the jungles shine in my
 Soul.
 I am afraid of this civilization—
 So hard,
 So strong,
 So cold.³³

The concentration of exotic stereotypes in this lyric is even more intense than in “Our Land.” The opening two lines comprise a sentence dense with the key words of primitivist African fantasies; even read according to the standards of their own time there is a temptation to take them as satire. The final four lines repeat the previous poem’s assessment of Western civilization as “cold” in ways that posit its implicitly African-American speaker as tragically weak: the abrupt transition from the rhythm, heat, and wildness of the jungle to the words “I am afraid” suggests, in contrast to Senghor’s *négritude*, that the supposedly essential qualities of Africanness are little match for Western culture’s impositions. And yet, as in the case of the second edition of “Our Land,” the title reframes and complicates the poem’s apparent simplicities, this time in a far more specific way.

The title indicates that the poem’s primitivism is not a naïve nativism. It is instead self-consciously routed through the circuits of international modernism, referencing the famously exoticist painter of Tahitian images, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Here again, the title imposes critical distance from the content of the verse. Specifying the poem as existing “after the manner” of Gauguin highlights its investment in exotica as a conscious choice. The way in which the framing insists on its own deliberateness stands in strong

tension with the essentialist claim of the poem's lines. The title of this poem is distinct from "Our Land" in naming a particular European artist as the means of this artistic decision-making. More interestingly, the poem offers a portrait of "an African boy" after the style of a painter who is not associated with sub-Saharan Africa and who did not live to see European interest in African aesthetics even begin to reach its full intensity. The title thus suggests a more slant relation to European modernist primitivism than might have been conjured up by an appeal to, say, Picasso or Modigliani. Not only does the poem self-consciously evoke the Europeanness of primitivism, thereby critically distancing itself from its tenets, it identifies different subsets of primitivism and re-shuffles them to its own purposes.

Just as this re-shuffling upsets the geography and temporality of primitivism, the tension between the poem and its title challenges the subject/object binaries that attend the relationship between word and image. That the poem introduces itself as a portrait might suggest a third-person description that claims language and subjectivity by objectifying the image of an African boy. But the poem is in fact a first-person lyric. While it is not clear if the poem's speaker is the "African boy" of its title, or the voice of the poet or painter who seeks to capture his image, the conventional word/image power dynamics are not quite operational here. Even if the poet is to extent ventriloquizing an African boy, or simply identifying himself as essentially African rather than African-American, the routing of the portrait through Gauguin at the very least suggests self-consciousness about what how African imagery is invoked.

To an extent, this poem is a perfect example Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi's theory of Harlem Renaissance poetry's relationship to Africa. "[T]he African-American poet ... is

sometimes [the Western] Self vis-à-vis Africa,” she argues, “and sometimes the Other vis-à-vis the dominant American culture.” (183).³⁴ For Mudimbe-Boyi, this phenomenon illustrates “the unity, but also the diversity and the originality of the literary creations and experiences from the Black diaspora.”³⁵ Both of these early Hughes poems certainly fulfill Mudimbe-Boyi’s rubric. Beyond just the exemplification of complexity and diversity, however, they also begin to work through a more specific and central crux of diasporic thought—the relationship between making and being. To read these poems as the practicing the most retrograde primitivism, as critics have understandably done, is to focus solely on the ontological side of the ledger: the poems are sentimental, politically vapid laments about the limitations of *being* an African diasporic subject. Like Locke’s art criticism, however, the poems also engage, through the framing work done by their titles, the creative side of the ledger. If the kinds of connections these poems imagine seem more melancholy than revolutionary, at a minimum they assert the possibility of making relations across the Black Atlantic, not simply being examples, or even victims, of the diasporic condition.

Hughes does of course take a more politically forward-looking stance not long after these poems were published, and none of the above discussion should obscure the fact that Hughes anticipated his own critics in turning away from the aesthetically grounded vision of diaspora that is in force in these early poems. His turn to a strictly Marxist vision of engaged literature in the nineteen-thirties has been well-documented and is beyond the scope here. One of the poems that marks this first major transition in Hughes’s career, however, does so in terms that suggest some continuity with the earlier lyrics precisely on the grounds on which I have just re-read them. Entitled “Call to

Creation” and published in *New Masses* in 1931, the poem is a repudiation of aesthetics and a claim for politics:

Listen!
 All you beauty-makers,
 Give up beauty for a moment.
 Look at harshness, look at pain,
 Look at life again.
 Look at hungry babies crying,
 Listen to the rich men lying,
 Look at starving China dying.
 Hear the rumble in the East:
 “In spite of all,
 Life must not cease.”
 In India with folded arms,
 In China with the guns,
 In Africa with bitter smile—
 See where the murmur runs:
 “Life must not cease,
 Because the fat and greedy ones
 Proclaim their thieving peace.”
 Their peace far worse than war and death—
 For this is better than living breath:
 Free! To be Free!

Listen!
 Futile beauty-makers—
 Work for a while with the pattern-breakers!
 Come for a march with the new-world makers:
 Let beauty be!³⁶

The poem seems as if written to answer the criticism of the earlier lyrics, not to mention those critics who excoriate Locke and the Harlem Renaissance in general. To create art objects is, in the logic of this work, to turn away from the struggle against economic injustice and refuse to act politically: “Futile beauty-makers—/Work for a while with the pattern-breakers!” The reference to Africa here is free of exoticism; the continent is included among other regions as proof of the poem’s radical internationalism. In fact, the poem does not position itself as involving an explicitly Black form of internationalism:

the focus is on the material underpinnings of injustice, in the Marxist sense of “materiality.”

And yet, by the time the poem closes with the double entendre “let beauty be”—an imperative that at once instructs the reader to leave beauty alone and to let it exist, presumably in a more full and meaningful sense—the poem has implicitly suggested that the divide between the political and the aesthetic might not be so sharp. While “Call to Creation” is indeed a rejection of a certain approach to art, its very title makes it clear that an interest in artistic creation has not disappeared from Hughes’s poetic ambit. The terms in which this poem makes its revolutionary case remain embedded in the language of making, with a tone suggestive of handicraft: “Work for a while with the pattern-breakers” who are the true “new-world makers.” This language follows on the framing of the early poems discussed above, and also anticipates post-war return to explicit engagement with aesthetics and expressive culture, usually music, in later works such as *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961). “Call to Creation” also imagines, despite its proclamations against beauty, the kind of expanded view of an aesthetics embedded in social practice that Locke increasingly identified in the realm of African art. This is not to ethnically “Africanize” the strictly Marxist Hughes of 1931, but it is to say that Hughes shares with Locke and Senghor a commitment literal and figurative craft as a realm in which aesthetic practice is not separate from the social and the political. The earlier Hughes poems reference paintings rather than works of plastic form (although the decorative panel could be a relief sculpture), but the poems are still “sculptural” in the sense that they invoke tactile creation, not just by employing rhetoric of making and framing but also by implicitly positing the shaping work of hands as an alternative to the

exoticism or political disengagement of the purely visual. Senghor's use of the word "handicraft" in describing African art is apposite: "[I]n black Africa art is not a separate activity, in itself or for itself: it is a social activity, a technique of living, a handicraft in fact."³⁷

Before refining this theory of the sculptural, it is necessary to turn to Hughes's contemporary, Léopold Sédar Senghor who, while Hughes was in his Marxist phase, was writing some of the foundational poems of the *négritude* movement. Writing in the nineteen-sixties, after decades of controversy surrounding the concept, Senghor defines *négritude* as "the African personality...a weapon, ... an instrument of liberation and ...a contribution to the humanism of the twentieth century."³⁸ It is, he writes, "the sum of the cultural values of the black world."³⁹ According to Senghor, one of the central expressions of *négritude* is to be found in the plastic arts of Africa. He credits the "discovery of African art" by European modernists as setting in motion the West's progress toward understanding the humanity of Africans, arguing that "[t]he fact that an art of the subject and of the spirit should have germinated outside Europe, in Africa—to which ethnologist had not yet given its true place in world culture—was proof of the human value of the message of the new European art."⁴⁰ Senghor's theory of African art emphasizes qualities that have been identified by other writers addressed so far in this dissertation: its social embeddedness, its relation to vitalist and animist beliefs, its plasticity, and its tactility.⁴¹

More controversially, Senghor aligns these qualities with an essentialist view of Africa as "Western civilization's" rhythmic, emotional, intuitive Other in a decades-long embrace and vigorous defense of the exoticism with which Hughes engaged briefly and,

as we have seen, more critically than often thought. Indeed, the above-quoted definition evidences some of the many justifiably criticized elements of *négritude*, especially as practiced by Senghor rather than by more radical figures such as Aimé Césaire, who coined the term. (Other well-known controversies surrounding Senghor's work would include his portrayal of women and his unqualified enthusiasm for the French language.) It is not the purpose of this discussion to fully consider all of the problems with *négritude*, nor to retrace some of the revisions and recuperations of the concept that continue to be produced. It is instead to focus on two early poems from Senghor's first collection, *Chants d'ombre* [*Shadow Songs*] (1945) both of which explicitly concern the form of the mask, to continue to refine the concept of sculptural affiliation as a way of rethinking diasporic modernism.

The title under which Senghor collected these poems asks the reader—or listener—to receive them not as poems but as songs, thus emphasizing their continuity with oral tradition. “Prière aux masques” [“Prayer to the Masks”] addresses itself to an assemblage of ceremonial masks used in the rituals of an unspecified African ethnic group:

Masques! O Masques!
 Masque noir masque rouge, vous masques blanc-et-noir
 Masques aux quatre points d'où souffle l'Esprit
 Je vous salue dans le silence!
 Et pas toi le dernier, Ancêtre à tête de lion.
 Vous gardez ce lieu forclos à tout rire de femme, à tout
 sourire qui se fane
 Vous distillez cet air d'éternité où je respire l'air de mes
 Pères.
 Masques aux visage sans masque, dépouillés de toute fossette
 comme de toute ride
 Qui avez composé ce portrait, ce visage mien penché sur
 l'autel de papier blanc
 A votre image, écoutez-moi!

Voici que meurt l'Afrique des empires – c'est l'agonie
 d'une princesse pitoyable
 Et aussi l'Europe à qui nous sommes liés par le nombril.
 Fixez vos yeux immuables sur vos enfants que l'on commande
 Qui donnent leur vie comme le pauvre son dernier vêtement.
 Que nous répondions présents à la renaissance du Monde
 Ainsi le levain qui est nécessaire à la farine blanche.
 Car qui apprendrait le rythme au monde défunt des machines
 et des canons?
 Qui pousserait le cri de joie pour réveiller morts et orphelins à l'aurore?
 Dites, qui rendrait la mémoire de vie à l'homme aux espoirs
 éventrés?
 Ils nous disent les hommes du coton du café de l'huile
 Ils nous dissent les hommes de la mort.
 Nous sommes les hommes de la danse, dont les pieds
 reprennent viguer en frappant le sol dur.⁴²

The song begins with a celebration of the masks in their ritual context, emphasizing the rhythm and dynamism of the rites in which they function, their role in accessing and representing Spirit and the ancestors. The second half of lyric turns from the masks indigenous context to the address "l'Afrique des empires" ["the Africa of Empires"] and the changing relationship between Africa and Europe. The poem moves from praying to the masks to the masks to informing the mask of Europe's representation of European culture and asserting "rhythm" as the particular contribution that African culture can make to a war-torn world. The metaphor of "white flour" makes the workings of Senghor's racial binary quite obvious: "Que nous répondions présents à la renaissance du Monde / Ainsi le levain qui est nécessaire à la farine blanche" ["Let us answer 'present' at the rebirth of the World/As white flour cannot rise without the leaven"].

At first glance, then, this prayer moves from the form of the mask outward: from the mask to its ritual context, from the ritual context to the past, present, and future of Africa's global situation. Its treatment of the mask form itself, however, deserves attention for its resonance with the sculptural imagination that this chapter has been

tracing. Senghor's interest in movement, performance, and ritual embeddedness notwithstanding, the poem lavishes significant attention on the masks as works in themselves: their shapes and colors, what we might call their sculptedness. In addressing the "Masque noir masque rouge, vous masques blanc-et-noir" ["Black mask, red mask, you white-and-black masks"], Senghor offers a perspective that is not one of complete ritual participation but one that instead shares some of Locke's more detached contemplation of the social meaning of aesthetic qualities. "Masques aux quatre points d'où souffle l'Esprit" ["Masks of the four cardinal points where the Spirit blows"], says the poem's speaker, "Je vous salue dans le silence!" ["I greet you in silence!"]. Even as parts of the poem suggest that its setting is a ritual in progress, the "silence" of the speaker's greeting suggests that the poem takes place in a space of aesthetic contemplation not unlike the space that Locke implicitly imagined in his design *The New Negro* and which he found realized in the 1935 MoMA exhibit.

"Prière aux masques" further connects with Locke's brand of formalism, as well as Hughes's interest in craft and its metaphors, in its descriptions of the masks. The speaker's address to the "Ancêtre à tête de lion" ["Ancestor with the lion head"] indicates the social function of this mask, but the near rhyme within its name (Ancêtre / tête) suggests as well the mask's identity with itself, the extent to which it is an autotelic work. The poem's initial address to the masks becomes increasingly the appearance of the masks and the quality of their surfaces. These are "Masques aux visage sans masque, dépouillés de toute fossette comme de toute ride" ["Masks with faces without masks, stripped of every dimple and every wrinkle"]. The image of masks that are with faces without masks is recursive; it troubles any attempt to understand them simply as being in

a one-to-one relationship with the spirits or concepts that they represent. The emphasis on the smoothness of the masks' surfaces, meanwhile, highlights their status as the product of artisanal labor, and the distinction between their faces and those of humans further insists on their status as the products of creativity, emphasizing their facture over their function. Before the poem turns toward Europe, two complicated lines deepen the poem's theory of creation, commingling the sculptural, the visual, and the scribal: "Qui avez composé ce portrait, ce visage mien penché sur l'autel de papier blanc / A votre image, écoutez-moi!" ["You created this portrait, my face leaning on an altar of blank paper / And in your image, listen to me!"].

These lines are impossibly complicated and just as rich in their provocatively scrambled circuits of authorship and agency. The masks, the speaker proclaims, have created their own portrait. At the same time, he refers to his own act of composing the poem, with his "face leaning on an altar of blank paper." The poet asserts his own writing, but he does so in a way that blends the scribal with something more materially tactile. The act is not about the application of pen to paper but a worshipful touching of the face to a paper become an altar. This encircling of the written and the sculpted makes an implicit claim for the ability of short, relatively self-contained forms such as the mask and the lyric to bear complicated political and aesthetic meaning. This investment in the free-standing but socio-politically saturated qualities of a work—which is how we might define Locke's revision of Fry—is shared by the three authors discussed in the chapter, as well as by some of the European "primitivist" modernists with whom they have such controversial relationships. Like Locke, Senghor is explicitly aware of African art's

le dessin du menton” [“The paten of cheeks, the line of chin”]. Meanwhile, as in the previous poem, Senghor turns to the mask’s texture as proof of its carver’s work: “Tête de bronze parfaite et sa patine de temps / Que ne souillent fards ni rougeur ni rides, ni traces de larmes ni de baisers” [“Perfect head of bronze with its patina of time,/ Unsullied by rouge or blushing or wrinkles / No traces of tears of kisses”].

That the form of a well-made mask resonates with the form of the lyric is suggested in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s, comment on the place of the mask in the African diasporic imagination. He describes the form of the African mask in general as

a vehicle for the primary evocation of a complete hermetic universe, one of force or being, an autonomous world, marked both by a demonstrably interior cohesion and by a complete neutrality to exterior mores or norms. This internal cogency makes it impervious to the accident of place or time. The mask, with its immobilized features all the while mobile, itself is a metaphor for dialectic—specifically, a dialectic or binary opposition embracing unresolved or potentially unresolvable social forms, notions of origins, or complex issues of value. Mask is the essence of immobility fused with the essence of mobility, fixity with transience, order with chaos, permanence with the transitory, the substantial with the evanescent.⁴⁵

Gates’s theory applies well to Senghor’s mask, and indeed goes some way toward describing the And yet, important though the formal resonance between the lyric and the mask seems, Gates’s mask sounds a bit too much like the well-wrought lyric of New Criticism. The important dialectics that Gates identifies risk being frozen within his

almost platonically abstract definition of the mask form. In contrast to Gates's understanding, Stephanie Newell re-reads Senghor's dialectics in relation to the tactility that has been emphasized in the above readings of Senghor's poems: "Senghor seems to be trying to break away from relations based on sight, on the gaze, which is the primary sense through which the 'Other' is classified in the colonial relationship. In so doing ... he *develops* the 'master-servant' dialectic away from its fascination with the gaze, toward a new ethical relationship based upon touch and movement."⁴⁶

These metaphors of tactility and sculpturality continue to thrive in important works in African and African-American literary studies, namely Brent Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora*, which has influentially called for an "anti-abstractionist" theory of diaspora.⁴⁷ In his reading of diaspora as an ongoing practice fueled by creation and translation, Edwards employs two key words that are of great relevance to this chapter's discussion of sculptural affiliation: articulation and *décalage*. The former term comes from Stuart Hall's well-known "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance." For Edwards, it marks "a process of linking or connecting across gaps—a practice we might term *articulation*" (11). More broadly, articulation signals at once the expression of something and the joining together of two things. The term thus shares a metaphors of handicraft with Edwards's second term, which comes from Senghor himself. *Décalage*, Edwards tells us, "can be translated as 'gap,' 'discrepancy,' 'time-lag,' or 'interval'; it is also the term that French speakers sometimes use to translate 'jet lag.' In other words, a *décalage* its either a difference or gap in time (advancing or delaying a schedule) or in space (shifting or displacing an object)" (13). Etymologically, the term refers to

“the taking away of something that was added in the first place, something artificial, a stone or piece of wood that served to fill some gap or to rectify some imbalance” (14). For Africans and African-Americans, according to Edwards, *décalage* marks “the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water ... an unidentifiable point that is incessantly touched and fingered and pressed” (14).

The metaphors of craft and sculpture here are irresistible, even as Edwards invokes “something artificial, a stone or piece of wood” as that which is removed or missing in the gap between Africa and its diaspora. The poetry and criticism discussed in this chapter, on the other hand, suggests, if not a total demetaphorization of this handicraft rhetoric, at least the implication that things made out of wood (not to mention metal and other sculptural materials) *are* in fact among the very things out of which the community of the African diaspora is produced. If diasporic affiliations are organized around unidentifiable points that are, in Edwards’s manual metaphor, “touched and fingered and pressed,” these points are perhaps not so strictly asymptotic, as Edwards as it, but simply extra-linguistic, and thus especially amenable to being written through a profound concern in real and imagined plastic arts. The ways in which Locke, Hughes, and Senghor appeal to the sculptural and the tactile invest objects of arts and crafts with portable and translatable cultural meaning, while also emphasizing diasporic identity as something that is created, not lived as an ontological essence. In that regard, the craft and sculpture-oriented writings of Locke, Hughes, and Senghor offer an even less abstractionist view of diaspora than Edwards imagines. There is a politics in this craft-oriented approach to the aesthetic. In focusing on Locke, Senghor, and the early

“primitivist” Hughes, this chapter has deliberately emphasized some of twentieth-century Black internationalism’s more politically compromised figures over any number of their more unproblematically radical and engaged counterparts. Nonetheless, it is in the aesthetic realm where these authors so controversially tarry that a powerful assertion of creative agency can be found, one that links different parts of the diaspora in an ethics of craft, communication, and learning.

¹ James Johnson Sweeney *African Negro Art* (New York: Arno Press, 1966), 11.

² Christopher Green, “Roger Fry’s Canon – From African Sculpture to Maurice Vlaminck,” in Christopher Green, ed., *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry’s Vision of Art*. (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999), 135-212, 136. This definition of plasticity was also used repeatedly by Locke’s colleague and *New Negro* contributor Albert C. Barnes.

³ Alain Locke, “African Art: Classic Style,” in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983), 149-155, 153. Originally appeared in *American Magazine of Art* 28 (May 1935): 270-278.

⁴ Virginia Woolf quotes Fry as expressing frustration with his own repeated dependence on the word “plastic,” but also as claiming that an alternative was not available. Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 257.

⁵ Alain L. Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925). Further citations from this anthology will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁶ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1997), xvi.

⁷ Ibid, 117; xvi.

⁸ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4.

⁹ Ibid, 72.

¹⁰ Ibid, 75.

¹¹ Ibid, 74.

¹² Ibid, 74.

¹³ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 22.

¹⁴ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 128.

¹⁵ Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1998), 121 .

¹⁶ Rachel Farebrother, *The Collage Aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance* (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 57-58.

¹⁷ Ibid, 69.

¹⁸ Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 157.

¹⁹ Braddock poses an interesting contrast between Locke's design and the more prominent use of white space in James Weldon Johnson's important collection, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922): "[T]he bibliographic code of *The New Negro*—at the level of the individual page but above all in the terms of the many forms and media that constitute the collection as such—is pointedly one that does not isolate its poems, but rather persistently articulates its disparate materials together," 182.

²⁰ Ibid, 183.

²¹ Ibid, 183-184.

²² John C. Charles, "What Was Africa to Him?: Alain Locke, Cultural Nationalism, and the Rhetoric of Empire During the New Negro Renaissance," in *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance: Essays on Race, Gender, and Literary Discourse*, ed. Australia Tarver and Paula C. Barnes (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 33-58.

²³ Ibid, 51. Charles does briefly acknowledge Locke's later writing on Africa, 56, footnote 21.

²⁴ Alain Locke, "Art Lessons from the Congo," *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983), 137-138. Originally appeared in *Survey Graphic* 57 (February 1, 1927): 587-589; original photographs not reproduced.

²⁵ Alain Locke, "African Art: Classic Style," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983), 149-155. Originally appeared in *American Magazine of Art* 28 (May 1935): 270-278.

²⁶ The Alain L. Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Center, Howard University. Box 164-105, Folder 11. Locke's 1927 proposed syllabus for a course in "African Art and Culture," which was written for submission to the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, is a four-page document which imagines an introductory course of profound rigor and, especially by today's standard, extraordinary depth and breadth. The course is divided into four sections, some of them organized around now-outmoded concepts. The first section, entitled "The Culture Levels and Their Associated Culture Traits" focuses on the forms and theories of "primitive art," citing theorists such as Boas and covering the history of African crafts in an anthropological context. The second

section, “The Main Types and Periods of African Art” covers everything from Egyptian and Nubian art to the art of the African Islamic world and sub-Saharan societies of every scale, from kingdoms to nomadic groups. Along the way, this section proposes a critical re-reading of Frobenius. The third section, “African Cultural Ideas as Reflected in African Art,” traces the changes in European interpretations of African religion as well as art’s relationship to ritual, oral literature, and other kinds of folk performance. The final section, “The Modern Disco[v]ery and Influence of African Art,” proposes an up-to-the-minute review of African art’s relationship to European modernism, beginning with a discussion of the transition from “the former purely ethnographic interest” to the “making of the great museum collections,” 4. The section addresses European theorists and artists from Paul Guillaume to Matisse and Picasso before moving on to the African-American uptake of sub-Saharan art in the Harlem Renaissance, ending with Locke’s own theories. It is not clear from Locke’s archives whether this class was ever taught.

²⁷ The political potential of the aesthetics of modernist plasticity is somewhat surprisingly noted by Houston Baker, who writes with regard to *The New Negro* that “The work has, in effect, the character of a panorama’s ‘unlimited’ view, summoning concerns not of a problematical ‘folk’ but rather those of a newly emergent ‘race’ or ‘nation’ – a *national culture*,” 73.

²⁸ Alain Locke, “Advance on the Art Front,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* (May 1939): 132-136, 132.

²⁹ For Hughes’s later interactions with the struggle for South African liberation see Shane Graham and John Walters, eds., *Langston Hughes and the Drum Generation: The Correspondence* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

³⁰ Langston Hughes, “Our Land,” *The New Negro*, 144.

³¹ Hutchinson, 270.

³² Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), 33.

³³ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 32.

³⁴ Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, “Harlem Renaissance and Africa: An Ambiguous Adventure,” in *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 174-184.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 184.

³⁶ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 135.

³⁷ Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Négritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century,” *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 27-35, 33.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

⁴¹ Here I describe the qualities that interest the authors under consideration without necessarily endorsing them as the only important qualities of African art or as the most fundamental or essential characteristics of what is of course an extraordinarily large category. For the problems with some of the oft-repeated commonplaces about African art’s basic formal qualities see Suzanne Preston Blier, “Enduring Myths of African Art”

in *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. Curated by Tom Phillips. (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996), 26-32.

⁴² Léopold Sédar Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, trans. Melvin Dixon (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 277-278. Dixon's English translation is as follows:

“Masks! O Masks!
 Black mask, red mask, you white-and-black masks
 Masks of the four cardinal points where the Spirit blows
 I greet you in silence!
 And you, not the least of all, Ancestor with the lion head.
 You keep this place safe from women's laughter
 And any wry, profane smiles
 You exude the immortal air where I inhale
 The breath of my Fathers.
 Masks with faces without masks, stripped of every dimple
 And every wrinkle
 You created this portrait, my face leaning
 On an altar of blank paper
 And in your image, listen to me!
 The Africa of empires is dying—it is the agony
 Of a sorrowful princess
 And Europe, too, tied to us at the navel.
 Fix your steady eyes on your oppressed children
 Who give their lives like the poor man his last garment.
 Let us answer ‘present’ at the rebirth of the World
 As white flour cannot rise without the leaven.
 Who else will teach rhythm to the world
 Deadened by machines and cannons?
 Who will sound the shout of joy at daybreak to wake
 Orphans and the dead?
 Tell me, who will bring back the memory of life to the man of gutted
 hopes?
 They call us men of cotton, coffee, and oil
 They call us mean of death.
 But we are men of dance, whose feet get stronger
 As we pound upon firm ground” 13-14.

⁴³ Senghor, *Collected Poetry*, 271-272. Dixon's English translation is as follows:

“She sleeps and reclines on the whitest of sand.
 Koumba Tam sleeps. A green palm leaf veils the fever
 Of her hair, copper the curved brow
 Eyelids closed, double basins, sealed springs.
 The delicate crescent of lips, one darker and slightly heavy
 --where is the smile of the knowing woman?
 The paten of cheeks, the line of chin
 Sing in silent harmony.

Facelike Mask closed to the ephemeral, without eyes,
 Without substance,
 Perfect head of bronze with its patina of time,
 Unsullied by rouge or blushing or wrinkles
 No traces of tears of kisses
 O face such as God created you before even the memory of
 time
 Face of the world's dawn, do not open like a tender
 mountain pass
 To stir my flesh.
 O Beauty, I adore you with my one-stringed eye," 9-10.

⁴⁴ Janice Spleth, *Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 57.

⁴⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 168.

⁴⁶ Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), 37.

⁴⁷ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 12. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

African Modernism in and out of the Museum:

Achebe, Soyinka, and the Visual Arts

In 1963, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka met in a museum.

The two Nigerian writers were joined by the South African writer Lewis Nkosi for a recorded interview at the Museum of Nigeria in Lagos. Achebe, who had achieved international renown five years earlier with the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, was the subject of the interview. Soyinka, who had not yet established himself as anglophone Africa's major playwright, shared hosting duties with Nkosi. The interview covers Achebe's biography, his writing, his experience meeting with African-American authors in the United States, and his opinions of other Nigerian writers. It also begins and ends with references to the museum setting in which it was recorded. Soyinka indicates that prior to the interview's taping, Achebe has been showing his interlocutors some of the Igbo carvings on display. Soyinka frames a question about masculinity in *Things Fall Apart* with reference to an *ikenga* carving, a small wooden object that can be roughly described as representing an individual's personal god, or *chi*. These carvings figure prominently in *Things Fall Apart* and would do the same in Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God* (1964). At the end of the broadcast, Nkosi signs off by saying, "We are greatly privileged to have met Chinua Achebe at the Museum of Nigeria, surrounded as we are by the masks and the brooding spirit, which is about the same kind of thing that broods in the novels by Chinua Achebe—the past is very much there."¹

That Nkosi would so invoke the presence of African masks may not be surprising, nor might it seem especially notable that the national museum would be an appealing backdrop in the early days of Nigerian independence. In considering the work of Achebe

and Soyinka in relation to the global history of African art and literature, however, the space of the museum suggests a telling counterpoint to the conventional understanding of how both authors view the idea of the African art object. The treatment of African art in the work of Achebe and Soyinka is often viewed as an act of antimodernist repatriation: they remove the appropriated art object from the figurative museum of modernism and return it to its indigenous ritual context. There is substantial truth in this, but the relationship between an object and its context is not, for Achebe and Soyinka, as static as this narrative implies. They both imagine circulating African art objects through a lens of reparative autonomy; for neither author does the physical removal of, for example, a mask from its intended location evacuate that mask of its ability to lead its viewer to the larger aesthetic that produced it. In this reparative manner of imagining autonomy, the metonym becomes a microcosm of a larger totality. In this way, Achebe and Soyinka engage with the visual arts in ways that reveal deep continuities between their writings and the global modernist response to African art in the twentieth century that this dissertation has so far traced. They continue to help us see the power and influence ascribed by Hayford to golden stool of the Ashanti, and that Locke finds in the many works with which he had rich encounters in museums.

In a strictly literary framework, Achebe and Soyinka are each known for having fraught but very different relationships to the European tradition of modernist literature. Achebe's famous rejection of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is one flashpoint in the ongoing conflict between modernist and (postcolonial) African literary studies;² the assault on Soyinka for his experimental, sometimes obscure style, what Chinweizu termed "Hopkins disease," is another.³ While more will be said about these conflicts

below, this chapter will focus on the relationships of both authors' oeuvres to the art historical narrative of African art and modernism. Achebe and Soyinka will prove more similar in this regard, in ways that have consequential implications for how we view the intersection of modernism and postcolonialism in literary studies. If the previous two chapters have shown that African was not a passive object of modernist literature, but a founding contributor to it, this chapter's investigation of Achebe and Soyinka, both towering figures in the postcolonial canon, considers how this re-definition of modernism changes received ideas about a modernist-postcolonial divide in literature. This divide can be seen either as a historical break, in which modernism gives way to the postcolonial at mid-century, or as a divide between radically opposed scholarly orientations and reading methods. An investigation of Achebe and Soyinka's writing about art will trouble both perceived divisions.

It will do so by tracing in the work of Achebe and Soyinka thematic, formal, and stylistic intersections with Igbo and Yoruba art, as well as with questions of aesthetics more generally. Art and material culture are presented by both authors in their pre-colonial cultural contexts, to be sure, but the decolonizing political force of this process does not lie in a rejection of the aesthetic. The politico-aesthetic imagination exercised in these works is, crucially, not reducible to the narrative of primitivism and anti-primitivist revision that to this day frequently delimits the terms of any discussion of African cultural production and global modernism. As discussed in the previous chapters, a central tenet of this critique of modernism is the idea that it uncomprehendingly "aestheticizes" works that should instead be viewed as strictly functional. Neither of these authors' work on African art, however, simply reflects a restorative functionalism

or filling in of missing ethnographic detail, and this is of no small consequence for either the politics of their projects or the political implications of current scholarship. In fact, Achebe and Soyinka both make use of the aesthetics of sculptural self-containment as a primary means of figuring social totality.

I. Achebe, Art, and the Problem with Context

In his essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” Chinua Achebe famously criticizes Conrad’s novel for exemplifying the tendency “in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.”⁴ Achebe connects Conrad’s racial ideology to his modernist literary techniques, in particular the impressionism of Conrad’s style. Conrad’s misrepresentation of the people of the Congo as inscrutable and savage is not only racist but “raises serious questions of artistic good faith” because Conrad, “while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact” is in fact “engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery.”⁵

Achebe’s argument here is an important instance in the tense relationship between African and modernist literary studies. It is frequently placed alongside above-discussed criticisms of Pablo Picasso’s “discovery” of African art at the Palais du Trocadéro, which stands to this day as an emblematic narrative of appropriation, a cultural imperialism inextricable from Africa’s violent colonization. Achebe is also allied with the critics of

Charles Larson's narrative of "the emergence of African fiction,"⁶ which led to Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike's denunciation of "Larsony" as the practice of holding African letters to falsely universalist standard of modernization.⁷ Alongside the pathology of "Larsony," these three critics posited "Hopkins disease" in assaulting the use of modernist poetic aesthetics on the part of some Nigerian poets, Soyinka included. More recently, the reconstitution of the "new" modernist studies around the turn of the twenty-first century, despite its interest in transnational expansion, has thus far yielded little new work on the relationship between modernism and African literature. Most recently, Achebe has been invoked as a realist for scholars in postcolonial and anglophone studies who advocate for a "new realist turn," which they claim is a necessary correction for what they see as a history of "reading for modernism" in anglophone criticism.⁸

That Achebe, whether discussing modernism or any other topic, was a thoroughgoing champion of the value of African culture and a steadfast opponent against imperialism at all levels should be obvious. It is clear from Achebe's critical and fictional writing, however, that his anticolonial politics—and aesthetics—did not involve a rejection of modernism, least of all the view that the circulation of African visual art beyond its original context as an impossibly compromised phenomenon. The subtlety of Achebe's position on modernism is worth exploring not only to correct the tendency to view his aesthetics as strictly functional or didactic, but because this simplification serves to support a false binary between modernism and African literature, a perceived division that continues to be the source of a troubling and unproductive divide between postcolonial or Africanist critics and their modernist studies or "world anglophone" counterparts. The antiracist project of Achebe's article on Conrad should not be

downplayed; if anything, “An Image of Africa,” which significantly predates Said’s *Orientalism* and the major writings of Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, should be read even more widely as a founding document of postcolonial theory. It is clear from the essay itself, however, that Achebe’s explication of Conrad’s racism does not rest on a problem with modernism in general, nor with African art and literature’s place in it. The real problem with Conrad, according to Achebe, is his willful incomprehension of African culture, his unwillingness to learn about it. Achebe makes his point by way of discussing African art in the context of global modernism. Achebe compares Conrad’s representation of the Congo with art historian Frank Willett’s discussion of an influential Fang mask:

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad’s River Congo. They have a name, too: the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world’s greatest masters of the sculptured form. The event Frank Willett is referring to marked the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength. The points of all this is to suggest that Conrad’s picture of the peoples of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold’s International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa. (16)

Achebe’s concern here is that the founding contribution of African art to international modernism be understood and credited. Like Alain Locke, he sees the transnational circulation of African art as a source of potential communication and learning. The distinction between this view and the postmodern, revisionist focus on appropriation

exemplified by Mariana Torgovnick's work on primitivism is a sharp one that nonetheless often gets lost in discussion of modernism and African humanities.

As the first chapter argued, Torgovnick's position, in its concern to acknowledge the literal and epistemic violence of colonialism, emphasizes appropriation over influence in a way that often positions artists and writers from Africa as passive victims rather than creative agents. Furthermore, that chapter's reading of J.E. Caseley Hayford suggested that an excessively limited and Eurocentric view of modernism's development positions African writers and artists as belated, denying their modernity and reproducing the pernicious temporalities of stadial theory. Achebe—specifically in the course of analyzing Conrad's racial politics—offers a critique fundamentally different from the of the postmodern anti-primitivist revisionists (and one in which primitivism is not an important concept). In the preface to his collection *Hopes and Impediments*, in which “An Image of Africa” is the first essay, Achebe returns to *Heart of Darkness*, placing it next to its W.E.B. Du Bois's precisely contemporary proclamation that the “problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Achebe's comparison of Du Bois and Conrad is worth quoting in full to demonstrate how its anti-imperial politics rests in substantial part on an insistence of coevalness:

The verb he used is interesting: *is* instead of *will be*. And he wrote his words not during the 1960s Civil Rights marches in American as the tone might suggest to some, but actually in 1903—‘at the dawning of the Twentieth Century’ as he himself put it, and only one year later than Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This chronology is of the utmost importance. Therefore the defence sometimes proffered: that Conrad should not be

judged by the standards of later times; that racism had no become an issue in the world when he wrote his famous African novel, will have to clarify whose world it is talking about.⁹

Achebe's challenge to those who would explain away Conrad's racism on the grounds of social and historical context grows out of a synchronic and international analysis of the state of modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is clear from Achebe's other essays that he addresses questions of art and aesthetics from the same broad perspective, a perspective that is more spatial than temporal in its emphasis on comparison over theories of linear progression or development. In responding to the idea that African literature is undeveloped or rudimentary compared to European output, an idea that, as discussed in the first chapter, remains prevalent in current work on pre-independence writers such as Hayford, Achebe writes, "To levy a charge of underdevelopment against African writers today may prove as misguided and uninformed as a similar dismissal of African art by visitors of an earlier age before the coming of Picasso."¹⁰

Scholarship on African literature seems to be a long way from endorsing Achebe's assertion, but the specific way in which Achebe frames this argument is significant, not least because it is so different from the framing that dominates current critical debates. Although it is the case that Achebe considers the novelist as playing a didactic role, the extent of this didacticism, as well as its perceived opposition to modernism, should not be overstated. In his essay "The Novelist as Teacher," Achebe famously declares that he "would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones ... set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its

imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.”¹¹ This anticolonial imperative is tied to a rejection of “art for art’s sake” in what is often taken as evidence of a schism between modernism and postcolonialism. “Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure,” writes Achebe, “But who cares? Art is important, but so is education of the kind I have in mind.”¹²

Achebe’s pre-emptive response to a hypothetical distinction between “pure” and “applied” art here does not indicate belief on his part in such a divide; the totality of his fiction and criticism leaves no doubt that the kind of education he has in mind is profoundly engaged with aesthetic creation. He is in fact responding to a very particular set of broadly “modernist” aesthetic assumptions pervasive in the Anglo-American academy during the 1960s. Charles Larson’s *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1971) is most frequently mentioned in African literary studies as the prime example of what Achebe called “colonialist criticism”—the idea that African novels should be judged by the extent to which they catch up with Western preferences for fiction focused on individual interiority, paradox, and experimental or crystalline form, and “universal” themes among other criteria. Achebe’s critique of this cultural imperialism sets itself squarely against models of uneven development which position African writers as belated: “The latter-day colonialist critic, ... given to big-brother arrogance, sees the African writer a somewhat unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European.”¹³ African literature, Achebe asserts, grows out of “commitment to an African destiny,” not “a future European identity for which the present is but an apprenticeship.”¹⁴ As in his essay on Conrad, Achebe’s problem with

modernism has to do with modernism's being invoked in ways that put temporal distance between writers from opposite sides of the equator who are in fact contemporaries, not necessarily any particular set of formal approaches in themselves.

It is surprising, then, that Achebe has recently become a key figure for critics calling for a "new realist" turn in postcolonial studies.¹⁵ Achebe's literary criticism is opposed to prescriptive modernism, to be sure, but it is also opposed to aesthetic prescriptions in general. The range of reference in Achebe's essays clearly shows that he was no respecter of modernist/realist, modernist/postcolonial, or modernist/"African" binaries. If the title of his essay "The Truth of Fiction" suggests a celebration of realist verisimilitude, its examples, not to mention its argument, tell a different story. Warning against the "sclerotic rigidity of literal-mindedness," Achebe defines the truth of fiction, and by extension art more generally, as "an adventure of self-discovery," not simple mimesis.¹⁶ Among Achebe's paragons of "true" art are Picasso's paradigmatically modernist *Guernica* and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, a work whose categorization is a subject of controversy but which can hardly be defined as an example of conventional realism. To the limited extent that Achebe thinks about art in binaries, they are broad binaries of limitation versus liberation, not divisions based on form or style. Although scholars, as well as writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who is understandably seen in many ways as his heir, sometimes make reference to Achebe in their explicit claims for realism, it is difficult to find identical arguments in Achebe's own major statements on form, politics, and literature.

If a renewed interest in realism seems to be the current major point of contention between African and modernist literary studies, this debate remains related to the older

controversy about African visual art and European primitivism. Before arguing that Achebe's novel *Arrow of God* reframes, and indeed shows us a way out of, these old and tendentious debates, it is worth considering what Achebe's critical essays have to say about African art's global circulation. As the previous chapters discuss extensively, there is a longstanding principal in much postmodern or postcolonial literary criticism, art history, and museum studies that European modernism appropriated African art on terms so radically unequal and imperialist that the very presence of African art objects in museums or textbooks constitutes such a decontextualization as to be an irredeemable misrepresentation. The implicit upshot of this critique, its logical extension, seems to be that African art cannot be learned about through conventional artistic study, or that the attempt to do so, especially on the part of non-Africans, is tantamount to a repetition of colonial violence. Achebe, whose authority on matters of cultural imperialism need not be defended, argues something significantly different. Far from suggesting that African art is fatally vulnerable outside its immediate cultural context, he insists on the desirability of its being learned about by others and proclaims its ability to influence art around the world.

In fact, in the process of expressing concern for the state of African literature in international scholarship in the 1970s, Achebe turns to the history of African art's international influence as a more positive example, one which he would like the international uptake of African literature to replicate. Achebe looks back far before the modernist era, to 1701, to consider the reaction of the Dutch merchant David van Nyendaël to the art he encountered in Benin. Nyendaël responded with disgust to the bronzes, even though a large number of Benin art objects were later looted by the British

in 1897 and became influential museum staples. Achebe's discussion of Nyendael is worth quoting at length to illustrate once again the extent of the difference between Achebe's confidence in the stature and value of African art as opposed to the tender concern for it expressed by anti-primitivist revisionists (for Achebe, neither primitivism nor primitiveness is mentioned as a factor):

Let us emulate those men of Benin, ready to guide the curious visitor to the gallery of their art, willing to listen with politeness even to his hasty opinions but careful, most careful, to concede nothing to him that might appear to undermine their own positions within their heritage of compromise the integrity of their indigenous perception. For supposing the artists of Benin and of Congo and Angola had agreed with Nyendael in 1701 and abandoned their vision and begun to make their images in the style of 'developed' Portugal, would they not have committed a grave disservice to Africa and ultimately to Europe herself and the rest of the world? Because they did not, it so happened that after the passage of two centuries other Europeans, more sensitive by far than Nyendael, looked at their work again and learnt from it a new way to see the world.¹⁷

It is especially notable that Achebe invokes the image of the art gallery, so often viewed as a tragic destination for African art objects, in describing the location of these Benin art works. Rather than describing the original context of the Benin art as an unknowable to outsiders, he attributes to their physical surround the qualities of a museum, a kind of space which, like Alain Locke, Achebe implicitly sees as a realm of potential learning and exchange. His belief that these art works can maintain their meaning and their value

beyond their original contexts, meanwhile, recalls Hayford's insistence on the ability of the Ashanti golden stool to travel globally even under violent, imperialist circumstances.

Achebe does, however, depart to an extent from the early twentieth-century modernists on formal questions related to his distinction between the individual-artist centered view of European modernism and what he describes as a more communal creativity as practiced in the Igbo tradition. In particular, his emphasis on the ritual functions of art objects that involve motion stands in contrast with what can be seen as an interest in stasis on the part of European modernists and some of Alain Locke's earlier writings on African art. There is no doubt that Achebe revises and expands the relationship between modernism and African art, and that he does so in large part by resituating art objects in their dynamic ritual contexts; the difference between Achebe's representation of masks and carvings and that of D.H. Lawrence is of course quite significant. In considering Achebe's writing about Igbo art in essays, interviews, and most extensively his novel *Arrow of God*, however, we will see important continuities with those elements of modernist aesthetics that were substantially influenced by West African art in the first place.

Achebe's discussions of Igbo art focus on the practice of the *mbari* tradition, in which art objects are not viewed as the products of an individual genius. "Part of my artistic and intellectual inheritance," Achebe writes, "is derived from a cultural tradition in which it was possible for artists to create objects of art which were solid enough and yet make no attempt to claim, and sometime seven go to great lengths to deny, personal ownership of what they have created."¹⁸ Although we have already seen that Achebe is

not opposed to the museal display of art objects, *mbari* art offers a different logic of collection that favors the creative process over the display of final products:

Mbari is an artistic ‘spectacular’ demanded of the community by one or other of its primary divinities, usually the Earth goddess. To execute this ‘command performance’ the community is represented by a small group of its members selected and secluded for months or even years for the sole purpose of erecting a befitting ‘home of images’ filled to overflowing with sculptures and paintings in homage to the presiding god or goddess. These representatives (called *ndimbge*, sing.; *onyembge*), chosen to re-enact, as it were, the miracle of creation in its extravagant profusion, are always careful to disclaim all credit for making, which rightly belongs to gods; or even for initiating homage for what is made, which is the prerogative of the community. *Ndimbge* are no more than vessels in which the gods place their gifts of creativity to mankind and in which the community afterwards make their token return to sacrifice and thanksgiving. As soon as their work is done behind the fence of their seclusion and they re-emerge into secular life, *ndimbge* set about putting as much distance as possible between themselves and their recently executed works of art.¹⁹

Achebe elaborates on the *mbari* tradition in his essay for a museum exhibit on Igbo art, an act which further underlines his willingness to participate, if somewhat critically, in the international museum scene. Achebe’s “contextualization” is not an appeal to a fixed tradition, for *mbari* practice is centered above all on the imperative to innovate: “the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every

generation will receive its own impulse and kinesis of creation.”²⁰ Achebe’s explication of the relation between the social and the aesthetic in Igbo art may not be European *l’art pour l’art* at its most extreme, but neither is it pure functionalism: “The practical purpose of art is to channel a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of that force. It stands to reason, therefore, that new forms must stand ready to be called into being as often as new (threatening) forces appear on the scene.”²¹ The intertwining of the social and the aesthetic found in *mbari* art is expanded on profoundly in *Arrow of God*, not just in the novel’s many depictions of artistic practice, but throughout its narrative fabric.

According to his biographer Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Achebe conceived *Arrow of God* partially in response to Thurstan Shaw’s excavation in 1959 and 1960 of a large number of art objects and other artifacts at Igbo-Ukwu. “I was quite impressed by the display,” Achebe told Ezenwa-Ohaeto, “especially the fact that something like that would come out of the Igbo land.”²² *Arrow of God* introduces its readers to a similarly vast display of Igbo culture. The novel illustrates how the fictional Igbo village of Umuaro produces and reproduces itself through acts of material and spiritual making. Its protagonist, Ezeulu, is the priest of the god Ulu, whom “[e]very boy in Umuaro knows that Ulu was made by our fathers long ago.”²³ Eventually, after British officers jail him upon failing to recruit him as a warrant chief, Ezeulu asserts the will of Ulu by refusing to eat the ritual yams that will allow the community to harvest that year’s crop. Ulu, the made god, unmakes himself in this failure to reproduce the village’s means of feeding itself: the novel ends with the prospect of mass Christian conversion among the people of Umuaro. Meanwhile, one of Ezeulu’s sons, Edogo, is a carver who is frequently depicted at work on doors and

masks. As in *Things Fall Apart*, the masquerade serves as a central metaphor for Igbo social totality as well as the backdrop for the plot's denouement.

In order to begin where Achebe's novel seems furthest from the modernist emphasis on the plastic form of the static African art object, this reading will start near the end of the novel, during a ritual that involves two of Ezeulu's sons, Obika and Edogo. Here, Achebe pauses from the narrative of Ezeulu's decision to delay the yam harvest to present a detailed depiction of an *Akwu Nro* festival, in which Obika's age cohort presents a new *Agaba* mask carved by Edogo. Obika's role in presenting the *Agaba* mask, which stands "for the power and aggressiveness of youth" (199), is appropriate: among Ezeulu's children, Obika is perhaps the most associated with tradition and resistance to colonial incursion. As Obika dazzles the assembled crowd with his strong dancing and expert sacrifice of a ram, Edogo moves through the ritual space anxiously eyeing the effectiveness of his carving, evaluating its form while also listening to the opinions of spectators. Although this extended set piece is less famous than the unmasking of the *egwugwu* episode in *Things Fall Apart*, it refers to and expands on this earlier scene to achieve an extraordinarily broad and deep recontextualization of the Igbo mask in its ritual origins, addressing some common misconceptions about African art along the way.

In his trademark synthesis of ethnographic description and propulsive narration, Achebe explains the importance of the new mask and the ritual protections that the men of Obika's age group have undergone in preparing to serve as its harbingers. The Mask itself—and here the word refers at once to the person wearing the mask and the spirit it represents—will come from another village so that the performer's identity cannot be easily recognized by the women and children. Achebe has already raised this question of

the Mask's identity across gender lines in *Things Fall Apart*; in this novel he describes the elders of Umuofia as solving the problem by instituting a new rule about hiring outside dancers (194-195). In briefly setting up the scene of the masquerade, Achebe has offered both a lesson in the cultural conventions of the masquerade and a reminder of that culture's ability to adapt to change by developing new approaches to reproducing the tradition. After establishing the masquerade's cultural dynamism, Achebe turns to an illustration of the physical dynamism that characterizes its performance:

The approach of the Mask caused a massive stampede. The women and children scattered and fled in the opposite direction, screaming with the enjoyment of danger. Soon they were all back again because the Mask had not even come into sight; only the *ogene* and singing of the followers had been heard. The metal gong and voices became louder and louder and the crowd looked around them to be sure that the line of flight was clear.

[...]There was another stampede when the first harbingers of the Mask burst into the *ilo* from the narrow footpath by which it was expected to arrive. These young men wore raffia and their matchets caught the light as they threw them up or clashed them in salute of each other from left to right and then back from right to left. They ran here and there and sometimes one would charge at full speed in one direction. (197)

The scene of the masquerade in this passage is in direct contrast to the position of the paradigmatic West African mask in the museum setting of early twentieth-century Europe. If modernism's African mask is imagined as shorn of its surrounding material and frozen in the stark stasis of a museum display, Achebe's masks are embedded in an

onrush of narrative detail that emphasizes their dynamism. Achebe underlines the aesthetic centrality of motion through Edogo's inability to judge his own carving in its studio context: "Edogo knew ... that he must see the Mask in action to know whether it was good or bad. So he stood with the crowd" (200). To judge the aesthetic effect of the Mask as it dances, Edogo must immerse himself in the scene of its social reception. Edogo's success in making his mask dance is mirrored by his brother's performance, which also depends on setting an object in motion so that it combines with its environment to produce a thrilling effect: "Obika came forward, threw up his matchet with a twirl so that it revolved and caught the light of the evening on its blade" (201).

In addition to stressing the importance of motion and performance to Igbo mask making, Edogo's progress through the masquerade strikes against another widespread misconception about African art: its supposed anonymity. Edogo goes among the crowd at the masquerade not only to see his mask from all angles but to listen for comparisons between the style of his Agaba mask and that of "the famous Agaba of Umuagu" (200): "[Edogo] had not after all set out to excel the greatest carver in Umuaro but he had hoped that someone would link their two names" (200). Here, Achebe asserts the individuality and stylistic variety among Igbo carvers, against the assumption of anonymity that, at least in the first half of the twentieth century, surrounded the international travels of West African art objects. The force of ritual tradition, Achebe reminds us, does not preclude innovation. Earlier in the novel, a description of Edogo's creative process points toward a model of creativity that evades either a model of individual genius or a primitivist model of repetitively traditional craft. Edogo moves to a hut full of "older masks and other regalia of ancestral spirits" (51) to complete the mask

that he is working on: “They produced a certain ambience which gave power and cunning to his fingers” (51). This hut provides a space in which Edo’s creative agency merges with that of the ancestral masks. He does not copy them, but Achebe’s syntax makes it clear that the carving being produced, although original and new, is not the result of Edo’s artistry in any sort of individualistic sense: “the carving finally got hold of him”; “the mask was beginning to come out of the wood” (51).

Achebe’s demonstration of Igbo material culture’s ability to ground a confluence of human and spiritual extends beyond the discussion of masks and rituals. His representation of Igbo sculpture in everyday life goes even further in illustrating how, in the words of art historians Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, “[v]irtually no aspect of Igbo life is untouched by aesthetic concerns.”²⁴ A crucial plot development early in the novel centers on the *ikenga*, or personal shrine. *Ikenga* figures now comprise a substantial portion of most museum exhibits and art history books on Igbo art, but in *Arrow of God* they appear first as an embedded aspect of the novel’s action—Achebe’s narrative proceeds from the assumption that the *ikenga* is not just an art object, but “an active spiritual principle which mediates the vicissitudes of human existence.”²⁵ The *ikenga* figure appears in the novel when a delegation from Umuaro, led by the belligerent Akukalia, travels to the village of Okperi on a diplomatic mission over a territorial dispute. Akukalia offends their Okperi host, Ebo, before negotiations can begin properly and violence ensues: “Akukalia rushed after Ebo, went into the *obi*, took the *ikenga* from his shrine, rushed outside again and, while everyone stood aghast, split it in two” (23). Ebo responds by shooting Akukalia; the conflict portends the mounting crises that Umuaro will face in the wake of growing colonial incursion by the British.

The scene unfolds without pausing to ethnographically situate those readers unfamiliar with the role of an *ikenga*, although it dramatizes its importance as a small statue associated with a masculine power and located in his private space, or *obi*.²⁶ A more complete explanation is withheld until the following chapter, when it is provided by the British official Captain Winterbottom: “I may explain that *ikenga* is the most important fetish in the Ibo man’s arsenal, so to speak. It represents his ancestors to whom he must make daily sacrifice. When he dies it is split in two; one half is buried with him and the other half is thrown away. So you can see the implications of what our friend from Umuaro did in splitting his host’s fetish” (37). Winterbottom’s explanation serves at least two purposes for Achebe. The facts that the author puts in his character’s mouth are basically accurate, and on that level contribute to the novel’s accumulation of Igbo cultural knowledge. At the same time, Winterbottom’s condescending tone underlines the fact that his knowledge is both incomplete and gathered only to be deployed in the service of cultural domination. By contrasting an experience of the *ikenga* embedded in narrative with an outsider’s dry description of its cultural significance, Achebe subtly insists on the variety of ways to categorize, imagine, and represent Igbo culture. His narrative provides a look at *ikenga* in a dramatic context, and then circles back to an ethnographic location of this object in Igbo cultural totality.

To recognize that narrative dynamism and more static descriptions co-exist dialectically in *Arrow of God* is to begin to understand how Achebe’s writing about visual art leads us to reposition him at the nexus of the not-quite parallel conceptual categories of modernism, realism, and postcolonialism. Adélékè Adéèkó provides a strong articulation of the antimodernist reading of Achebe, identifying in Achebe’s work

a “functionalist aesthetics” and a “defense of *realism* against critical judgments derived from the modernist tenet *l’art pour l’art*.”²⁷ According to Adéèkó, Achebe’s work departs from “the historically European aesthetic indulgences then masquerading as modernism” so as to “declare its commitment to a non-European (that is, non-modernist) outlook on culture, artifacts, and history.”²⁸ That this is a misrepresentation of Achebe’s own statements about modernism even in the most narrowly defined European sense of the term has already been suggested. Less passionately anti-modernist critics, however, still tend to take the subtly self-conscious approach to mimetic representation in Achebe’s work as ultimately a kind of realism with postmodern inflections. For both Simon Gikandi and Jonathan Peters, the mask serves as a figure for the very undecidability that complicates Achebe’s relationship to realism. The mask, Gikandi writes, is “the figure of duality, the kernel where the contradictory forces of a culture, its self-assertion and dissimulation, are all represented”²⁹; it is “the depository of essential values and as a figure of duplicity.”³⁰

Gikandi uses the figure of the mask to ground a brilliant analysis of Achebe’s profoundly complex narrative achievements in *Arrow of God*, an analysis rooted in the primacy of dualism in Igbo culture (a concept to which I will return). It is nonetheless curious that the avoidance of modernism in Achebe scholarship, especially when considering Achebe’s work in its relation to the visual arts, seems to leave us with either a kind of reductive functionalism not recently seen in the disciplines of anthropology or art history, or a poststructuralist reading in which important masks and carvings quickly dissolve into abstract figures for indeterminacy.³¹ Recalibrating Achebe’s relationship to international, and intermedial, modernism allows for a new direction. So far, this

chapter's reading of *Arrow of God* has traced the novel's critical and corrective response to the loss of dynamism brought on by the removal of the art object from its cultural field to the figural space of the modernist museum. There is another sense, however, in which Achebe's novel embraces some of the aesthetics of modernist autonomy that he elsewhere seems to oppose—in particular the aesthetics of sculptural self-containment, or “plastic form,” that attracted Fry, Lawrence, and Locke to West African sculpture. To place Achebe in this lineage of writing about African art is not to deny that he critically revises some of its tenets, but it is to assert his presence in a century-long transnational conversation about aesthetics that, as the previous two chapters have argued, originate in substantial part from African culture in the first place. This suggests a different genealogy of African literary modernism (or anti-modernism) than the chronology implied by focusing, for example, on Achebe's quotation of Yeats and Eliot in the titles of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. In this model, Achebe is not belatedly responding either to European innovation or decadent European self-indulgence, but contributing to and assessing African art's place in global modernity.

Against the idea that *Arrow of God*'s narrative serves exclusively to place African art objects in motion, even the scene of the masquerade discussed above contains countervailing mentions of the very kind of static, sculptural power celebrated by Fry and Locke. For all of the emphasis on the importance of viewing Edogo's mask in motion, the masquerade scene contrasts performative dynamism with something like the classicist stillness celebrated by Locke: “The crowd cheered tumultuously as one of the attendants picked up the head which had rolled in the sand and held it up. The Mask looked on with the same unchanging countenance. [...] The ram had moved its head at the last moment

and he had struck the horn. The Mask looked on unperturbed” (201). Although Achebe is referring here to the Mask as a performing individual, and not only to Edo’s carving, the reference to its “unchanging countenance” makes it clear that the static view of his mask is important as well as the dynamic. The parallelism between the two sentences about the mask in its unmoving state underlines the contrast between it and the motion surrounding it.

This passage sets up a dialectic between the aesthetics of stasis and motion by placing them side by side paratactically. Earlier in the novel, Achebe manages the relationship differently, through a contextually situated ekphrasis that builds on and departs from the ekphrastic passages addressed in the previous two chapters of this dissertation. In those chapters we have seen how the museal display of an art object is mirrored at the narrative level through ekphrastic description, and noted how theorists of ekphrasis view the mode’s spatializing tendency, the way it can stop or slow or the narrative’s temporal progression. Achebe briefly does just this in showing Ezeulu reenacting the arrival of Ulu, the god for whom he is chief priest:

He wore smoked raffia which descended from his waist to the knee. The left half of his body—from forehead to toes—was painted with white chalk. Around his head was a leather band from which an eagle’s feather pointed backwards. On his right hand he carried *Nne Ofo*, the mother of all staffs of authority in Umuaro, and in his left he held a long iron staff which kept up a quivering rattle whenever he stuck its pointed end into the earth. He took a few long strides, pausing on each foot. Then he ran forward again as though he had seen a comrade in the vacant air; he

stretched his arms and waved his staff toe right and to the left. And those who were near enough heard the knocking together of Ezeulu's staff and another which no one saw. At this, many fled in terror before the priest and the unseen presences around him. (71)

In this passage the description of the visual objects adorning Ezeulu in his ceremonial role opens out onto an exposition of their social significance. The passages progresses from a strictly visual portrayal of the raffia and chalk worn by Ezeulu and then proceeds from the stable visibility of ekphrasis to a description of his movements in costume before abandoning the visible to mention "the unseen presences around him" (71). Although this ekphrasis is a relatively brief pause from the novel's onrush of event, it shows that Achebe counts visual description as a viable category for cross-cultural learning. It further demonstrates that it is possible to focus on visual description in a way that does not sever art objects from their various contexts. Achebe's mention of raffia here and in a few other parts of the novel is especially salient, since the removal of this fiber from masks for museum display in Europe stands as a famous example of a kind of cultural appropriation that overemphasized the clean, stark style that appealed to modernists from the global north. If Achebe figuratively restores the raffia to the stripped African mask, he does so in a way that stops well short of eschewing the visible altogether. In fact, his location of Igbo masks and other adornments in the totality of the dress in which they appear anticipates the presentation of African masks in many current art exhibits, in which they are situated on human-scale models.

If it seems obvious enough to say that an author as known for equanimity as Achebe takes a balanced approach to the politics of the visual, it is worth remembering

the degree of suspicion accorded to the realm of visuality in some corners of African studies. The influential work of Dennis Duerden has emphasized the incompatibility of African and European frameworks for understanding art and its role. Writing on West African art generally, Duerden emphasizes instances in which African art fulfills ritual functions that have little to do with their being seen or even allowed to be seen: “In order that the cults and the diviners are able to carry out their functions the art must never become a frozen symbolism, must never make the structure of the present into a lasting and visible structure which takes too long to destroy. The present must become *invisible*.”³² While claims such as these no longer have the force that they did in the 1970s, their insistence on pure dynamism and ever-expanding horizons of cultural context seem to be partially reflected in the recent celebration of realism in anglophone literature, which is addressed more fully in the next chapter’s discussion of Adichie. The “new realist” emphasis on transparency and information is in its own way similarly pitched against anything like opacity or autonomy. (For all of its emphasis on aesthetic invisibility, Duerden’s critical model depends entirely on the anthropological exposure of African cultural principles, on making them transparently visible.)

Achebe’s contextualism, on the other hand, does not come at the expense of the text. Texts, works, and art objects are legitimate categories of inquiry in Achebe’s universe—as is the case for Alain Locke, they are potential catalysts for learning, comparison, and exchange. The question of how art objects relate to their social totality remains an open one for Achebe. Works of art function in the novel as realist metonyms for the Igbo social whole, of course. At the same time, the novel allows for the possibility that works might, in themselves, encapsulate the social totality rather than simply

functioning as a piece of it. In this regard Achebe is allied with Hayford and Locke in its relatively optimistic take on the ability of a particular artifact to stand, in the words of the novel, as a “crystallization of civilization” (10). Recognizing this strain in Achebe’s work requires a dialectical attention to both part and whole. Neil ten Kortenaar has recently advanced just this project in his examination of language and materiality in *Arrow of God*; he accurately calls attention to the ways in which the novel presents the material book as an “artificial container.”³³ Kortenaar is referring here to the appearance of the ethnography *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger*, which also appears in *Things Fall Apart*. The inadequacy of this fictional imperialist ethnography is clear enough, but the larger significance of Kortenaar’s argument lies in his identifying the novel’s explicit interest in how language, textuality, and materiality are intertwined. Achebe forcefully, but open-mindedly, raises the question of what a variety of cultural forms contain or do not contain: art objects, proverbs, books.

It is in fact the proverb that helps us to reconcile Achebe’s much noted contextualist commitment with his less heralded affinities with modernist autonomy.³⁴ Achebe’s rich treatment of the proverb form cannot be treated at all fully here, but the way in which the proverb is at once self-contained, portable, and dense with the larger cultural totality which it encapsulates can be analogized to the role of visual art in Achebe’s writing. The idea, shared by Hayford and Locke, that cultural objects can retain their meaning outside their original context helps to explain Achebe’s willingness to engage with the space of the art museum and his openness toward writing a novel inspired by the artifacts uncovered in the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological site. We have already noted the repetition in *Arrow of God* of the proverb advising spectators not to

stand still when viewing a mask: “The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place” (46).³⁵ With this saying in mind, it is easy to identify the sculptural resonance of another proverb frequently quoted by Achebe in interviews: “Where one things stands, another thing stands beside it.”³⁶ This proverb crystallizes the evenhanded wisdom for which Achebe is celebrated—and it does so by invoking the idea of looking at and moving around an implicitly fixed object.

The proverb recalls Locke’s faith in the creative and educative power of sculptural form. Furthermore, it invites us to see that the imperative to move when looking at a mask is a demand for dynamism on the part of the spectator, not simply a proclamation of the mask’s dynamism as a quality of its social function. This is important because, as suggested above with regard to Duerden’s writing, celebrations of African art objects’ embeddedness in ritual performance risks fixing that object in a static kind of functionalist ethnography. If it is true that Achebe’s achievement is to present “a thoroughly African world in thoroughly African terms,”³⁷ then it is true because of Achebe’s ability to imagine the nested and variously sized forms through which this totality is embodied. In this respect, Achebe’s invocation of *mbari* work in his essay on art is especially appropriate: the *mbari* studio is at once a collection of individual works and a work in itself, a work whose frame will eventually dissolve into its larger cultural surround, but only after it has been established as a bounded work. Like the *mbari* studio, Achebe’s writing establishes a world in which context and creativity are profoundly inseparable.

II. Totality Materialized: Soyinka Encounters the Art Object

If Achebe's relationship to modernism can sometimes seem oblique, the same cannot said of Wole Soyinka. Soyinka's prose, poetry, and drama are marked by a highly wrought style that is frequently challenging and, for some critics, obscurantist. At the thematic level, his interest in alienation and anomie matches well with conventional definitions of European modernism's concerns. His first novel, *The Interpreters* (1965), which focuses on the adventures of a group of young artists and intellectuals at the dawn of Nigerian independence has been called "probably the first modernist novel published in English by a West African writer."³⁸ The chronology implied in this statement is a good example of the belatedness ascribed to African work in discussions of modernism. One of the reasons for this problematic temporality, as we have seen, is an excessively narrow definition of modernism's defining qualities.

This chapter explores Soyinka's modernism not so much because of its stylistic difficulty or engagement with modern alienation, but because of its place in the century-long tradition of writing about African art. Like Achebe, Soyinka's portrayal of African art is often seen as an act of cultural repatriation. In plays such as *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Soyinka's actors explicitly perform the ritual setting-in-motion of Yoruba masks. These plays powerfully dramatize the removal of the art object from the stasis of the modernist gallery and the return of dynamism. At the same time, however, Soyinka is also fascinated with the ability of a single art object to capture and express its larger social totality even in circumstances of decontextualized stasis. To get at the full extent of Soyinka's investment in the potential borne by art objects in their most hermetic singularity, what he himself describes as a complicated

interplay of hermetic and the expansively totalizing, this section will look to Soyinka's nonfiction writing on art and to his novel *The Interpreters* rather than to his drama. Doing so will provide a more complete sense of Soyinka's pervasively sculptural imagination and its role in his aesthetics and his politics—an engagement with the visual arts that extends beyond the well-worn allegory of the mask in motion.

C. Clausius has recently made a strong argument for reading Soyinka in stark opposition to the modernist uptake of African art; she interestingly suggests that sculpture and drama function in Soyinka's work as opposing "temporal theatres."³⁹ Clausius's essay is worth considering in some detail for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the enduring strength of the anti-modernist critique associated with Marianna Torgovnick, focusing on how African art "provided exotic, formally-powerful signifiers that were instantly appropriated into a modernist agenda" (4). Second, it defines an important crux in Soyinka's aesthetics: his interest in tension between the static and spatial and its opposite pole of temporal dynamism, a tension that, as we have seen, is also important for Achebe. As scholars of Achebe have done, however, Clausius overstates Soyinka's commitment to the "temporal" side of the ledger. Operating, somewhat ironically, within a resolutely Western art world framework, Clausius charts with implicit approval an "evolution of modern and African art in the cultural centre of New York [that] demonstrates a shift from anthropological to cultural theater, from historical to aesthetic performance" (14). Clausius's language in positing a sharp difference between the political implications of gallery display versus those of the performance of the installation usefully crystallizes some of the problems with such a framing:

The mask, in particular as an art object, is stable and passive, patient in waiting to be filled with meaning. However, the mask as property of ritual is dynamic, aggressive, occupied by a dominant presence. Modern art presents an illuminating counterpoint to Soyinka's tragic drama in successfully eliding difference, originality, and coevality through a valorization of the racial creation of the individual self in opposition to externality and history, which is the on-going enterprise of modern culture. (30)

Modern culture may very well deserve such opprobrium, but the starkness of the oppositions with which she works have to little offer toward understanding the complexity of Soyinka's aesthetics. Instead, they conscript Soyinka into a postmodernist agenda, crediting him not on his own terms but for seeming to agree that 1970s performance aesthetics possesses the cure for modernity's ills.

To compliment Soyinka for his supposed embrace of postmodernism performance art is a positive example of the kind of misconception that frequently occur when Soyinka is judged according to some binary opposition that his own work either ignores or incorporates as an enlivening paradox. The most famous example of this dynamic, which is alluded to above, is the charge of the *bolekaja* critics that Soyinka is a decadent, Eurocentric obscurantist.⁴⁰ Soyinka's responses to these charges have been fulsome.⁴¹ In defending the "African-ness" of his work and worldview, however, Soyinka has invited charges of Romantic essentialism. For Biodun Jeyifo and other Marxist critics, Soyinka's interest in delineating such totalities as "the Yoruba worldview" represents an escapist mystification of colonialism's material causes and effects.⁴² Kwame Anthony Appiah,

meanwhile, critiques this aspect of Soyinka's writing on more cosmopolitan and anti-identitarian grounds, while also evincing an analytic philosopher's distaste for Soyinka's interest in metaphysics.⁴³ In response to these variously motivated angles on Soyinka's thinking, this chapter contends that Soyinka's relationship to visual art explains some of the problems and contradictions that seem to arise when he is viewed through a rigidly antimodernist lens. Recognizing Soyinka's modernist investment in singular art objects, the particular kind of African-influenced approach to sculptural autonomy that this dissertation has identified, reframes the concerns raised by Jeyifo and Appiah. When Soyinka defines "Yoruba culture" or "the African world" in ways that can sound reified and inattentive to historical change, he is not indulging in a retrograde language of racial or national genius. He is experimenting with language that will capture the power of the creative arts to both encompass the social totality that produces it and to produce new social worlds in its turn.

The title of Soyinka's important critical work, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1974), boldly indicates Soyinka's belief in literature's ability to get a purchase on a particular social category in its entirety. It is the ambition of this work to "transmit through analysis of myth and ritual the self-apprehension of the African world," to assemble cultural details into a "composite image" of this totality.⁴⁴ Soyinka's principal source in this essay is Yoruba tragedy, but he does not celebrate the performative in the way that Clausius does. Rather, Soyinka's argument is powered by a dialectic between performative dynamism and an aesthetics of hermetic fixity and stasis. This latter strain operates stylistically as well as conceptually. As Soyinka maps the coordinates of the

Yoruba “world,” his argumentative style employs repetition in a reflexive, recursive way that underlines Soyinka’s hermeticism by creating a kind of closed rhetorical circle.

This argument—at once repetitively insistent and elusive—takes as its foundation the four metaphysical worlds of Yoruba culture as Soyinka defines them: the worlds of the ancestors, of the living, the dead, and “the fourth space, the dark continuum of transition where occurs the inter-transmutation of essence—ideal and materiality” (26). This space, Soyinka writes, “houses the ultimate expression of cosmic will” (26). It is the role of art, broadly conceived, to negotiate and reconcile these spaces. It does so in part via the agencies of three gods: Sango, Obatala, and Ogun. Sango, the god of lightning, receives little attention in the essay, but Ogun stands as the guiding mythic figure of this work and, it is fair to say, of Soyinka’s corpus in general. Soyinka explains his multivalent powers in part by contrast with those of Obatala, who represents the “virtues of social and individual accommodation: patience, suffering, peaceableness, all the imperatives of harmony in the universe” (13). Ogun, meanwhile, is defined as “the master craftsman and artist, farmer and warrior, essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbibor, a reluctant leader of men and deities” (27). He represents “the creative-destructive principle” (28). Obatala’s “task is to create the lifeless form of man,” but, according to Soyinka, this involves merely being a “functionalist of creation, not, like Ogun, the essence of creativity itself” (28).

Despite the fact that Ogun is the god of carving, Soyinka defines Obatala as “the sculptural god” (141). This is to some extent because he associates Obatala with finished work and Ogun with creative action, but he warns against an analogy to Greek aesthetics that would align Obatala with the Apollonian and Ogun with the Dionysian. Viewers of

Yoruba sculpture should not be misled, Soyinka argues, by its apparent similarity to “aesthetic serenity of the plastic arts of the Hellenic” (141). Yoruba art is more immanent than transcendent, or, as Soyinka puts it in characteristically recondite language, “not ideational ... but ‘essential.’ It is not the idea ... that is transmitted into wood or interpreted in music of movement, but a quintessence of inner being” (141). Soyinka’s use of Greek aesthetics to explain Yoruba aesthetics by way of contrast is perhaps unsurprising given the goals of his essay, but in turning to Ogun he makes a more outrageous reference to the Hellenic: “Ogun for his part is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues. Nor is that all” (141). It is possible to read this statement as a somewhat comic exposure of the ridiculousness of needing to translate Yoruba culture into Western terms at all.

More importantly, this statement represents perhaps the apotheosis of Soyinka’s extraordinary will-to-totalize and this totalizing imagination’s close association in Soyinka’s argument with the creation of art. Also present in the statement are the qualities that have invited understandable criticism, from Marxist quarters in particular. For all of Soyinka’s explicit invocations of totality, it is difficult to identify the nature or scale of the totality that interests him. There is noticeable slippage, for example, between the categories of “Yoruba” and of “Africa” in the essay (with little mention of the intermediate category of the nation). There is an overlapping play of not-quite-parallel “worlds” in the text—Yoruba, African, Greek, Western—all of which are referred to in a kind of fixed, ethnographic present that seems inimical to the kind of social totality sought by dialectical materialists.

What Soyinka's critics have missed, however, is the way in which art functions to explain and mitigate some of these problems. The seemingly rigid fixity that Soyinka's language imputes to cultural categories should in fact be read as deploying a metaphoric of sculptural solidity. Read this way, Soyinka's way of discussing, for example, "the African world" stands not as ossified essentialism but a rhetorical insistence on this world's status as a *made* entity, as the product of creative forces. One of Soyinka's many descriptions of Ogun in the essay crystallizes this dynamic especially well: "The shard of original oneness which contained the creative flint appears to have passed into the being of Ogun" (28). The invocations of shard and flint in this statement evoke the craft of sculpture in a way that unites the hardness of a carving with the active and dynamic process that produces it. It is furthermore significant that this is just one of many instances in which Soyinka proffers a description of Ogun. In defining Ogun and other fundamental concepts in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Soyinka supplements his linear argument with recursive variations on his essay's central tenets. This circularity lends a sculptural quality to the essay itself; it enacts its own hermeticism in a way that invites readers to move around it and consider it from different angles.

If this sounds like spatial form in Joseph Frank's sense of the term, the language Soyinka uses in writing about the space of the theatrical stage only deepens the resemblance. We might expect the space of the stage to be the apotheosis of performative dynamism, the antithesis of the gallery setting, but in fact Soyinka's rhetoric turns the drama of the tragic stage into something like an *objet d'art*. Soyinka argues that "ritual theatre [is] a materialization of this basic adventure of man's metaphysical self. Theatre then is one arena...in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial

phenomenon of his being” (40). The theatre is not, for Soyinka, a space of pure movement and anti-essentialist difference, as critics such as Clausius might imply, but a “medium of totality” and a “manageable contraction of the cosmic envelope within which man...fearfully exists” (41). The idea that art serves to contract the cosmic envelope helps to explain the nested totalities between which Soyinka sometimes a bit unaccountably moves. In Soyinka’s world, a particular unit of art has the potential to serve as a microcosm of the larger totality. This is why, for Soyinka, the “profound experience of tragic drama is comprehensible within... irreducible hermeticism” (53). Soyinka is not content to make vague appeals to a larger social context, he takes the risk of defining Yoruba culture as a social totality and locating, it for all of his understandably controversial investment in the language of metaphysics, in tangible rituals, texts, and objects.

This is not to say that Soyinka has no problem with European modernism, but it is not the same problem that Western postmodernism has with it. It is true that Soyinka delivers a version of the common Africanist critique of modernism in his essay: “The idea of literature as an objective existence in itself is a very European idea, and ideologies are very much systems of thought of speculative goals considered desirable for the health of existing institutions (society, ecology, economic life etc.) which are, or have come to be regarded as, ends in themselves” (62). Soyinka is opposed to the autotelic claims of “Western” modernism, but this is not a wholesale rejection of aesthetic autonomy. He rejects the idea that art can be an end in itself, but he is fully open to the possibility that art’s relationship to the social can be expressed by a text or art object in its singularity; in fact, he suggests that hermetic works are the most successful in achieving a microcosm of

the macrocosm. The idea of mutual exclusivity between an autonomous art object and its social contexts—an article of faith for those who see African literature and modernism as irreconcilable—is a false dichotomy as far as Soyinka is concerned. The high stakes for Soyinka of attempting to create an art object that captures the social totality will be made especially clear if we turn to his first novel.

The Interpreters follows the activities of a group of young men—Egbo, Kola, Sekoni, Sagoe and Bandele—whose intellectual and artistic ambitions qualify them as “interpreters” of the emerging Nigerian state.⁴⁵ Like any short description of this elusive novel, however, this is too simple. First, Soyinka represents interpretation as always inextricably bound up with acts of making. Second, it is not clear that the Nigerian nation is the single object of the title characters’ interpretative work. While Nigeria sometimes appears to be the unit of totality that the interpreters seek to realize, at other times they are interested in the totality of Yoruba culture, or world religion, or totalities yet to be named. The novel’s openness to the yet-to-be-named accounts for one of the novel’s challenges—its comic use of idiosyncratic, made-up expressions, such as Egbo’s phrase “drink lobes” and the philosophy of “Voidante-ism.” This obscure language combines with the novel’s plot, which is episodic and temporally non-linear, to produce a work that holds in tension the extremes of dynamism and stasis that Soyinka writes about in his essays. *The Interpreters* combines fragmentation and obscurity with a thematic focus on totality and completion in such a way that invites readers to put the fragments together, and to consider the novel holistically, as something like an art object itself as opposed to a narrative. In this sense the novel’s aesthetics function similarly to Joseph Frank’s concept of spatial form, but Soyinka’s location of these aesthetics in Yoruba thought only

serves to underline the originary West African influence—via Fry, Lawrence, and Pound—on modernist form as defined by Frank. Read in the context of transnational modernism, Soyinka’s novel implicitly suggests that it is not coincidental that the “disintegration and reassembly” associated with Ogun can be found in the twentieth-century anglophone on either side of the north-south divide.

The Interpreters allegorizes its own ambition toward being an art object that in its autonomous singularity captures a larger totality through a plotline involving the visual arts. Two of the interpreters, Kola and Sekoni, follow separate paths toward creating works of profound totalizing ambition. Kola, a trained painter and art instructor, labors methodically on a painting entitled “The Pantheon,” which depicts Yoruba and non-Yoruba deities, “an enormous canvas which will contain all your gods” (46). Sekoni, on the other hand, is an untrained sculptor who, between making a hajj and his sudden death, quickly produces “The Wrestler,” a fully realized sculpture that Kola judges superior to his own painted effort. Although the text does not explicitly endorse Kola’s verdict, or posit a stark opposition between the two works, the ways in which the characters and the narratives contemplate the differences between these efforts are telling. Both works are modeled after characters in the novel, but while “The Wrestler” is unconsciously modeled on Bandele, “The Pantheon” is based on deliberately posed sittings with a variety of Kola’s friends, including Egbo, who models as Ogun.

Egbo, the novel’s primary exponent of traditional Yoruba belief, is displeased with how Kola renders him in the painting: “It is an uninspired distortion, that is what is wrong with it. He has taken one single myth, Ogun at his drunkenest, losing his sense of recognition and slaughtering his own men in battle, and he has frozen him at the height of

carnage [...] And then there is Ogun of the forge, Ogun as the primal artisan . . . but he leaves all that to record me as this bestial gore-blinded thug!” (233). Kola’s failure, according to Egbo, is to fall short of capturing the many sides of Ogun in a single image. In some ways, Egbo’s critique recalls Lessing’s claim in *Laocoön* that it is impossible for a work of visual art to fully express the tragic in a single instant of time. Lessing compares the visual arts unfavorably with drama in this respect, and we might expect Soyinka, whose own commitment to the tragic stage is profound, to agree. And yet, there are suggestions in this passage and elsewhere in the novel that the problem with Kola’s work has something to do with the fact that it is a painting and not a sculpture. Note the portrayal of the abstract painting owned by the African-American Joe Golder, which Sagoe finds “sickening” (193): “It showed white streaks on a fully black background. It could have been forked lightning on a black sky but he knew it wasn’t. The tongues which darted from the main gash were wet, dripping. No power of violence but a deliberate viscosity, the trapped dreg of milk pushing through wrinkled film and trickling uncertainly” (193). This painting, which is more concerned with its own medium than Kola’s mimetic work, is portrayed as debased for this very reason; its “deliberate viscosity” seems to assert nothing, to bear no meaning. This negative view of painting shows up metaphorically after Sekoni’s death, which leave the other interpreters “flat . . . all wet, bedraggled, the paint running down their acceptance of life where they thought the image was set, running down in ugly patches” (158).

These passages imply that the downfall of paint is its potential to exceed its frame. On the other hand, the novel presents the strength of sculpture as lying in its power to assert the finality of its own boundaries. Soyinka’s description of Sekoni’s

carving and the process of its creation implies that sculpture, in its solidity, paradoxically has a greater ability than paint to capture the effect of motion. Sekoni's carving is "a frenzied act of wood, he called 'The Wrestler'" (99). The model for this work is clearly Bandele: "Taut sinews, nearly agonising in excess tension, a bunched python caught at the instant of easing out, the balance of strangulation before release, it was all elasticity and strain" (99). Soyinka emphasizes how the form of the finished sculpture records the dynamic creative act that produced it: "And the rest, like the act of creation which took him an entire month and over, was frenzy and desperation, as if time stood in his way. Kola [...] watched with growing respect Sekoni turn the wood into some willful spirit whose taming was a magic locked in energy [...] Only Bandele's unique figure could have come to such pliant physical connivance with the form" (99-100).

The idea of "pliant physical connivance with the form" suggests the kind of transcendent unity of form and matter that the characters in the novel are constantly striving toward. The phrase also echoes the tension within the concept of "plastic form" as it used by Locke and Fry. In both cases the hardness and finality of a sculptural work is celebrated, but in terms that insist on the inseparability of this hardness from the plastic malleability that is its condition and the way that the work stands as a record of this plastic dynamism. The holistic power of Sekoni's sculpture is underlined when a discussion of it later in the novel is subtly contrasted with the interpreters walking into a rainstorm that brings "bobbing postherds" (220). Unlike the archaeologically inflected metaphor potsherds, the fragments of the material culture of the past, "The Wrestler" captures in its singularity the nested struggles, from the level of individual artistic

ambition to the struggle for national independence, with which the novel and its characters wrestle.

The above description of Sekoni's carving once again sharply recalls Lessing—the python and the “taut sinews, nearly agonizing in excess tension” are quite possibly deliberate allusions both to the Laocoön sculptures and Lessing's language in describing them. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the novel ultimately rejects Lessing's medium-based determinism, not only between literature and art, but between painting and sculpture. “The Wrestler” inspires Kola to realize “the knowledge of power within his hands, of the will to transform; and he understood then that medium was of little importance, that the act, on canvas or on human material was the process of living and brought him the intense fear of fulfillment” (218). On this score, the novel resonates with Soyinka's discussion of genre and medium in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, in which he opposes the idea that “there are watertight categories of the creative spirit, that creativity is not one smooth-flowing source of human regeneration. The very idea of separating the manifestations of the human genius is foreign to the African world-view” (130).

Indeed, Soyinka's position is distinct from the medium-specificity associated with such modernist art critics as Clement Greenberg, a champion of the abstract painting style that fares so poorly in *The Interpreters*. This in no way stops Soyinka from thinking comparatively across both culture and media, as he does in a lecture from 1986 entitled “Climates of Art.” Soyinka describes his experience upon encountering the work of the twentieth-century British painter Francis Bacon and identifies the influence of West African masks on Bacon's work:

“There was an odd familiarity about his specific scheme of image distortion and of course it did not take too long to recognize the source. Those who are familiar with the presentation of the numinous in African mask [sic] will perhaps recognize this similarity in the use of distortion.”⁴⁶ Soyinka’s reflections on Bacon are notable, not only for positing an African influence on a major European figure, but in that they provide an extreme instance of Soyinka’s willingness to draw the most totalizing conclusions from specific art objects. He describes Bacon’s distorted portrayals of the human body as “almost an attempt to capture an essence of [the] mask in motion” and as approaching, in a non-religious way, the “idiom of the total aesthetic of the mask in motion.”⁴⁷ Soyinka’s basis for the comparison is a Yoruba *egungun* mask from his own collection: “I possess an *egungun* mask which is almost a replica of one of Francis Bacon’s self-portraits.”⁴⁸

It is worth emphasizing Soyinka’s seemingly glancing mention of his own possession of a mask because, although the information is not surprising from one angle, it provides another example of Soyinka’s belief that an art object outside its initial context has not lost all strength and meaning. The art object, even where its autonomy is the result of violent removal and misappropriation, remains for Soyinka, as it does for Locke, a possible site of learning. This does not mean that every European or American modernist interpretation of African art is correct. For example, Soyinka’s distinction between Yoruba and Greek aesthetics may suggest that Locke’s invocation of classicism in his late writing on African art needs revision. The important thing is that the art object is able to ground such a conversation. In his remarks on Leo Frobenius’s writings about Yoruba culture, Soyinka excoriates Frobenius’s belief that the achievements of the

Yoruba are legible only as the work of the lost city of Atlantis. He does so in language that highlights the political urgency of properly reading the material artifacts of a culture:

For how ... does one describe the working of the mind of a searcher, an explorer who, confronted with material evidence of a culture, *in situ*, surrounded by living progenies of the culture that produced such artifacts, by custodians and manifestations of the cohesive totality of human experience of which those artifacts are a mere part; how explain the mind of an enquirer which, faced with this massive reality that embraces its mythologies of which, again, these artifacts are symbolic representations and/or celebratory instruments; how explain a mind which, faced with this evidence of an integrated world-view, still insists on his own mythology of cities lost in the mists of Etruscan or Phoenician antiquity to account for the unified reality whose feast is spread before him! (173)

Frobenius's failure here is his unwillingness or inability to move from the artifacts he finds to the "cohesive totality of human experience" or "integrated world-view" to which they can lead. The fact that this evidence is visual in nature, and from another time and place, is not the issue. As Soyinka writes, in a riposte to those who see the visual as a fundamentally compromised realm, "blanket iconoclasm is an undialectical proceeding on a par with blanket fetishization of myth and history."⁴⁹

Looking at art for Soyinka, and Achebe for that matter, should instead be a profoundly dialectical process in which the viewer considers the art object at hand and the totality, or nested totalities of different scales, that it might express. Unlike postmodern critics who stake their opposition to primitivism on assumptions that only

reinforce primitivist concepts, Soyinka and Achebe join Hayford and Locke in proclaiming African art's ability to survive its travels, even though these travels have largely occurred within the power imbalances and injustices of global modernity. The art museum in which Soyinka and Achebe met in the 1960s is not an inappropriate background for an encounter between two authors so associated with championing African art and literature. Their writing shows readers how to look at the art object in a way that recognizes that the dynamism of history and culture does not stop at the museum door.

Although Lewis Nkosi invoke the past in his meeting with Achebe and Soyinka in the museum of Nigeria, carvings and other objects do not function for these authors as relics. On the contrary, they are figures for the coevalness of African art and literature. The attention that both authors pay to the contours of a an artistic or literary work framed boundaries is no mere exercise in an indulgent fetishizing of the *objet d'art*, but, as Soyinka states most explicitly, a way of formally representing and learning about the larger social totality that produces it. For Appiah, Soyinka's African world "is one against which we should revolt ... because it presupposes false account of the proper relationships between private 'metaphysical' authenticity and ideology; a false account of the relations between literature, on the one hand, and the African world, on the other."⁵⁰ Appiah is surely correct that Soyinka's essay, with its free play between the categories of Yoruba and Africa, is not a trustworthy source of ethnographic knowledge, but it is better to read Soyinka's surfeit of totalizing moves as a claim for the right to demarcate a world. Soyinka's near-excessive rhetoric of worlding locates meaningful totalities in objects on a variety of scales, from work to genre (such as Yoruba tragedy) to culture to continent.

Thus he troubles the divide between work and context that has for so long shaped criticism on Africa and modernism. Both Soyinka and Achebe write about African art in a way that resonates with the historian of Yoruba art John Picton's claim that "the artifact itself (the work of art, the working of an art: the ambiguity is inevitable) is a context, a 'weaving together.'"⁵¹ In doing so they help us to see that, wherever and however African art may travel, its work is not easily undone.

¹ Lewis Nkosi and Wole Soyinka, "Conversation with Chinua Achebe" (1963), Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 11-17, 17.

² Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in *Hopes and Impediments Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 1-20.

³ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1983).

⁴ Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 4.

⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁶ Charles R. Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

⁷ Chinweizu, et al.

⁸ See a recent special issue of *MLQ* on "peripheral realisms" edited by Jed Esty and Colleen Lye: *MLQ* 73.3 (September 2012).

⁹ Chinua Achebe, "Author's Preface," in *Hopes and Impediments*, xiv-xv.

¹⁰ Chinua Achebe, "Colonialist Criticism," in *Hopes and Impediments*, 68-90, 88.

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," *Hopes and Impediments*, 40-47, 45.

¹² Ibid, 45.

¹³ Achebe, "Colonialist Criticism," 69.

¹⁴ Ibid, 74.

¹⁵ See Susan Z. Andrade, "Introduction," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 42.2 (2009): 189-199, 189, 192 and Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," *MLQ* 73.3 (September 2012): 269-288, 271.

¹⁶ Chinua Achebe, "The Truth of Fiction," in *Hopes and Impediments*, 138-153, 151, 153.

¹⁷ Achebe, "Colonialist Criticism," 89-90.

¹⁸ Chinua Achebe, "The Writer and His Community," in *Hopes and Impediments*, 47-61, 48.

¹⁹ Ibid, 48.

²⁰ Chinua Achebe, "The Igbo World and its Art," in *Hopes and Impediments*, 62-67, 64.

²¹ Ibid, 64.

²² Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* (Oxford: James Currey and Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 74-75.

²³ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (New York: Anchor Books [Second Edition] 1974), 42. Further references to the novel will be given parenthetically in text.

²⁴ Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1984), 1.

²⁵ Ibid, 27.

²⁶ According to Cole and Aniakor, *ikenga* "are used in male cults that address the powers, successes, and failures of an individual. [...] The basic Igbo *ikenga* image is a human with horns, sometimes rendered very simply as an abstract head-and-horns-on-base. Larger, more elaborate examples include fully realized males seated on stools, holding and wearing various symbols, and with more or less complex headdresses determined in part by horns and often including several other motifs," 24.

²⁷ Adeleke Adeeko, *Proverbs, Textuality, and Nativism in African Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 8.

²⁸ Ibid, 8.

²⁹ Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction* (London: James Currey, 1991), 52. See also Jonathan Peters, *A Dance of Masks: Senghor, Achebe, Soyinka* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1978).

³⁰ Gikandi, 55.

³¹ C. L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³² Dennis Duerden, *The Invisible Present: African Art and Literature* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975), 24.

³³ Neil Ten Kortenaar, "Arrow of God and the World on Paper," *Novel* 42.3 (2009): 467-473, 469.

³⁴ At many points throughout the novel, characters refer to the materiality of language by talking about words as things: "the words dried in her mouth," 128; "When did you people learn to fling words in my face?", 129; "Owner of words," 144; "do not speak into my words," 145.

³⁵ "You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade. You must imitate its motion," ("The Igbo World and its Art," 65; "Although Edogo could have taken one of the back seats in the *okwolo* he chose to stand with the crowd so as to see the Mask from different positions," *Arrow of God*, 200.

³⁶ Gikandi, 3.

³⁷ Bernth Lindfors, "The Palm Oil with Which Achebe's Words Are Eaten," in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* ed. C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1978), 47-67, 65.

³⁸ Obi Maduakor, *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to His Writing* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986), 81.

³⁹ C. Clausius, "The Temporal Theatres of Sculpture and Drama: Wole Soyinka and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art," *KronoScope* 7 (2007): 3-31. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁰ Chinweizu, et al.

⁴¹ Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

⁴² Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992).

⁴⁴ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), ix. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁵ Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1965). Citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁶ "Climates of Art," in *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 186-198, 194.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 194.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 194.

⁴⁹ *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, 182.

⁵⁰ Appiah, 80.

⁵¹ John Picton, "Art, Identity, and Identification: A Commentary on Yoruba Art Historical Studies," in *The Yoruba Artist*, ed. Rowland Abiodun, Henry J. Drewal and John Pemberton III (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 1-34, 1. Picton goes on to argue, convincingly, that "we must reckon with a derivation from the Latin verb *texere*, to weave, from which we also derive 'textile' and 'text'...and just as the artifact is a context, so too it is a participation in, a presupposition of, an enactment, a representation, a re-presentation of other contexts, severally, and succeeding one another through time and space," 1.

The Artisanal Turn in Twenty-First Century African Fiction

The previous chapters have examined the arts and material culture of sub-Saharan Africa and the many roles they played for anglophone literature across the twentieth-century: influence, object, symbol, victim, inspiration. This chapter will argue that the role of art and material culture in the work of two of Anglophone Africa's most active and influential contemporary writers, Zoë Wicomb of South Africa and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie of Nigeria, reveals a surprising continuity with the tradition of African modernist aesthetics that I have traced in this dissertation. Works of visual and plastic art are important to these authors as thematic and diegetic subjects. Additionally, they raise questions of materiality, craft, and framing in ways that allow for a deepened understanding of these writers' prose styles in general. Adichie, born in 1977, is the author of two international best-sellers that have been lauded for their realism and accessibility. Although nearly thirty years Adichie's senior, Wicomb's rise to literary prominence arrived not much before Adichie's, with *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) and *David's Story* (2000), a novel that has garnered substantial scholarly attention for its experimental, postmodern examination of the preceding and closing years of Apartheid. Both of these major figures of twenty-first century world Anglophone literature, despite their sharply different formal approaches, write frequently about African visual arts. This chapter argues that the diegetic representations of art in the works of both authors indicate an increasingly pervasive concern with artisanal production in both writers' oeuvres. This investment in the artisanal extends to a general concern with materiality—in particular the materiality of books, and writing itself—that recasts the conventional understanding of Wicomb as paradigmatically postmodern and

of Adichie as paradigmatically realist. The work of neither author can be fully understood without taking the measure of how their approach to writing is informed by, and depends on, their committed interest in extra-linguistic artistic and artisanal creative production.

I. Adichie Beyond Realism: Art, Craft, and Materiality in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

The global anglophone novel is seeing a return to realism, both as a literary practice and a critical frame. In a recent special issue of *MLQ* dedicated to “peripheral realisms” Jed Esty and Colleen Lye define the “new realist turn” in opposition to what they see as postcolonial literary studies’ anti-mimetic tendencies. They express dissatisfaction with postcolonial criticism’s focus on alterity, in particular how alterity is figured “by indexing absence as opposed to conjuring presence, or by figuring supplementarity as opposed to referencing experience.”¹ (271). Esty and Lye call for critics to “take seriously the possibility ... of representing the world-system rather than thematizing its unrepresentability.”² (284-285). Few contemporary authors would seem to fulfill these criteria more perfectly than Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Her novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) offer accessible and plot-driven works that move sharply away from either the critique of representation found in the work of J.M. Coetzee, or the experimental non-realism of novels such as Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991). Younger African writers like Adichie, Binyavanga Wainaina, Chris Abani, Moses Isegawa, and many others, are clearly dissatisfied with the kind of postmodern postcolonialism that disavows representation in favor of silence, aporia, or pure linguistic play.

This article argues, however, that Adichie's work, despite its profound investment in realism, also stages some of the problems with the realist model of representation, problems that are particularly salient with regard to the representation of Africa in literature as well as other media. By examining Adichie's historical novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* both for its diegetic representation of arts and material culture and for its persistent attention to its own bibliographic materiality, I will demonstrate that Adichie's fiction is not entirely reducible to realism, even in the careful and expansive sense that the term is understood by proponents of the new realist turn within African literary studies. On the contrary, the novel combines realism with elements of modernism and postmodernism in ways that upend old debates about the supposed divide between realist and experimental literature. In doing so, it implicitly warns us against a too-easy return to the idea that realism has, by its very nature, an especially accurate or politically superior purchase on historical reality. I will return later to why I think the "new realist" critics make this mistake, but I begin with the context for Adichie's own claims for realism, which are situated less in the academy than in the international journalistic and pop culture circuits of (mis)representations of African history, culture, and current events. Adichie sees these misrepresentations as standing in need of realist correction, to be sure, but what has been less remarked is her work's sophisticated understanding of the way in which these stereotypes rely on a logic of easily consumable African "reality"—logic that cannot be escaped through complete adherence to mimesis.

Prior to its publication, *Half of a Yellow Sun* was excerpted in a special issue of *Granta* entitled "The View from Africa." Appropriately, it appeared alongside what would become a widely circulated satire of African stereotypes by Binyavanga Wainaina,

a Kenyan author of Adichie's generation. Wainaina's essay has been often cited in recent years for its scabrous satire of representations of Africa that portray the continent as homogenous, tragic, and passive, its only hope of salvation riding on the good offices of such benefactors as U2's Bono.³ "Treat Africa as if it were one country.... [with] huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving," Wainaina mockingly advises writers who would seek to represent African reality.⁴ The tone of the *Granta* issue in general, however, illustrates just how difficult it is to escape the cycle of politically compromised representation. The volume features fiction and essays from a range of important African writers, but its very title betrays the desire to package divergent dispatches into a single "view" for the cosmopolitan reader. This paradox is captured in the issue's introduction, in which John Ryle rehearses familiar cautions about the pitfalls of homogenizing representations, but still manages to combine sentimental generalization about Africa ("The capacity for hope in the face of catastrophe is a characteristically African gift") with casual Eurocentrism (a wry admission that a Sudanese hip-hop artist's work "may not be quite in the Wilfred Owen league").⁵

Adichie positions her work as opposing the kind of misrepresentation that Wainaina excoriates. "If all I knew about Africa were from popular images," she stated in a popular TED talk, "I, too, would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind white foreigner."⁶ The title of Adichie's talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," implicitly rebukes the single view implied by the *Granta* issue's title. In the tradition of her mentor and fellow Igbo-Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, Adichie sees novelists as teachers.

She deploys realism to correct images of "sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives."⁷ Adichie's books—her two novels as well as her short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009)—have been praised for delivering narratives about Nigeria that educate and entertain. The official web site for *Sun* collects approving critical quotations, largely from British and American authors and journalists.⁸ On the top of a long vertical list of blurbs is an endorsement from Achebe, whose claim that Adichie is “endowed with the gift of the ancient storytellers” authenticates Adichie as a specifically African writer whose novel is supplemented by a pre-novelistic, non-European storytelling tradition. Having established that Adichie has bona fide access to African reality, the web page goes onto ensure readers that she will share her access through an accessible style. The novel is lauded as an “artful page-turner” full of “descriptive triumphs,” (*Publishers Weekly*) and as “powerfully realistic” (Merle Rubin, *Los Angeles Times*). According to *The Observer*, “[r]eading this novel is as close as you can get to the terrifying experience of being at war.” Some reviews are specific about the novel's use of non-experimental realism: Maya Jaggi notes its “clear, undemonstrative prose” and Rob Nixon cites Adichie's use of metonymy, which “speaks through history to our war-racked age not through abstract analogy but through the energy of vibrant detail, [and] a mastery of small things” (*The New York Times Book Review*). Not surprisingly, some of the blurbs emphasize the novel's cultural “difference” while simultaneously domesticating it through comparison to an American cultural touchstone: “It's like *Gone with the Wind*, except in Nigeria,” writes *New York*.

This presentation of Adichie and her novel is certainly legible as an example of what Graham Huggan has influentially termed the “postcolonial exotic,” the cynical

marketing of books from the global south as exotic commodities for privileged literary tourists.⁹ Adichie—not to mention her publishers, critics, and scholars—are of course part of this dynamic, and some of the above-cited reviews demonstrate the validity of Huggan’s concerns. To read the marketing and reception of the novel in an entirely negative way, however, would be to miss the complexity of the novel’s stance toward these elements of literary life. Huggan’s critique of the marketing of postcolonial books is ultimately a paratextual version of postcolonial theory’s broader concern with representation as being ethically questionable in itself, a view exemplified in African literature by such novels as Coetzee’s *Foe* (1985) and Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2000). Against this late-twentieth century strand of postcolonial writing, Adichie embraces realist form as an ethical solution to misrepresentation. Part of what makes this brand of realism new, meanwhile, is its concomitant interest in the realm of paratexts and circulation. While Huggan sees the literary marketplace as irredeemably compromised, Adichie treats it as a zone of legitimate creative production, on a continuum with artisanal handicraft and writing itself. This explicit interest in books’ material lives—both in the sense that they are physical objects and in the sense that they exist within economic circuits—is the first sign that Adichie’s artistic interests exceed simple mimesis.

Half of a Yellow Sun is a historical novel that traces the lives of five characters between the early days of Nigerian independence in the early 1960s and the Biafran War that divided the country from 1966 to 1969.¹⁰ The novel focuses on Olanna, a wealthy young Igbo woman, her lover, Odenigbo, their houseboy, Ugwu, Olanna’s twin sister, Kainene, and Kainene’s British lover, Richard. Sweeping ambitiously between the

personal and political causes and effects of the war, *Sun* seeks to present an unflinching view of violence on scales large and small, through the clear, “readable” style for which Adichie has been widely praised. Adichie uses the form of the historical novel to address the Biafran War with depth and insert a specific moment in African history into what she sees as an overly general and homogenous treatment of Africa in the global cultural marketplace.

Before examining how Adichie challenges and augments conventional novelistic representation, it is necessary to consider the qualities that have led so many of *Sun's* readers to find it so satisfyingly “representative” of longed-for information about Africa. Indeed, just as its reviews from literary critics suggest, Adichie's manipulation of personal and political scales provides an emotionally immediate sense of the personal consequences of the Biafran War while including, for example through political debates between Odenigbo and his intellectual friends, more macro-level analyses of how the war was brought on by the political legacy of British colonialism and the geopolitics of oil. Adichie achieves this in substantial part through a classically realist toolkit: omniscient third-person narration, free indirect discourse, and frequent use of metonymy. These techniques advance Adichie's stated goal of opposing the “single story” of Africa that so often circulates internationally. The novel focuses on the Biafran War in its historical particularity. Even as it limits itself to characters on the Biafran side of the civil war, and largely affluent characters at that, the novel presents depth and specificity with regard to a subject, violence in sub-Saharan Africa, that has been so often treated with a generality deemed politically irresponsible by authors and scholars. Adichie's presentation of multiple stories, however, does not, at least at the level of narrative style, involve a

radical combination of types of stories, nor does it explicitly question the limits of narrative's ability to represent the real. Her readers are not likely to ask, as the narrator of Wicomb's *David's Story* does in a moment of frustration, "Who could keep going in a straight line with so many stories, like feral siblings, separated and each running wild, chasing each other's tales?"¹¹ (201). Instead, Adichie's approach to combating the dangers of the "single story" is to fight misrepresentation with more representation, guiding her readers toward new perspectives through her inviting and accessible prose.

The effectiveness of this approach—and some of its limitations—can be seen through an examination of the character Ugwu, the professor Odenigbo's houseboy. Ugwu comes to Odenigbo's urban home from the village as a boy in the early sixties, and ends up being conscripted into the Biafran Army, where, in a key scene late in the novel, he participates in a gang rape. The novel's opening pages consider Ugwu's first encounter with urban life in Adichie's paradigmatically realist mode. Focalized through Ugwu's consciousness, the scene elicits sympathetic identification between the reader and Ugwu as he learns to read the metonyms of modernity found in Odenigbo's home: "Ugwu did not believe that anybody, not even this master he was going live with, ate meat *every day*" (3); "When he saw the white thing, almost as tall as he was, he knew it was the fridge. His aunty had told him about it" (6). Identification here is, of course, accompanied by at least a hint of exoticization; a slightly winking tone toward, for example, Ugwu's aunt's definition of a refrigerator as a "cold barn" (6). Although this approach defamiliarizes the trappings of modernity, it may also invite condescension on the part of some readers. Just as the collection of reviews on *Sun*'s official web page position Adichie as at once different enough from American and British readers to

qualify as a source of African knowledge and similar enough to represent that knowledge accessibly, the novel's opening offers Ugwu as embodying a comfortable balance of otherness and approachability.

It is thus all the more shocking when, in one of the novel's most forceful insistences on the effect of historical forces on personal experience, Ugwu, intoxicated and goaded by his fellow soldiers who have renamed him "Target Destroyer," rapes a barmaid. In this scene and others, Adichie brings to her description of bodies in pain the same abundance of detail that she applies to her description of Odenigbo's apartment (458). Another moment of spectacular violence in the novel depicts the decapitation of Kainene's servant, Ikejide, in an airport mortar attack. The following passages from both scenes demonstrate how Adichie's realist technique renders extremes of violence:

Ugwu pulled his trousers down, surprised at the swiftness of his erection.

She was dry and tense when he entered her. He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down, or at anything at all as he moved quickly and felt his own climax, the rush of fluids to the tips of himself: a self-loathing release. (458)

A piece of shrapnel, the size of a fist, wheezed past. Ikejide was still running and, in the moment that Richard glanced away and back, Ikejide's head was gone. The body was running, arched slightly forward, arms flying around, but there was no head. There was only a bloodied neck. (398)

There is no hesitation to represent the traumas of violence here. Adichie's descriptions

eschew silence, metaphor, and poetry. The portrayal of the rape offers resolutely anatomical detail, while the decapitation scene is cinematic in its emphasis on making violence visible, even if its execution threatens to approach the cartoonish. Such portrayals of violence may come uncomfortably close to offering the “naked dead rotting bodies” that Wainaina mockingly identifies as ingredients for internationally successful writing about Africa. They appear to support Brenda Cooper’s charge that Adichie’s violent and sexual representations exemplify a kind of pornographic pandering. For Cooper, Adichie is an author at once “outraged by the distorted representations of Africa and ... sucked into the discourse which produces them.”¹² While Cooper is correct that passages such as the two discussed above are in themselves problematic, it is difficult to believe that the distorted discourse of which the novel is so aware simply gets forgotten in these moments. These passages, though not necessarily among the novel’s most successful, exemplify only one of the many kinds of representation that the novel explores. *Sun*, in its ambition to incorporate multiple stories, encapsulates the kind of single story it finds dangerous, including it as one option among many. Adichie demonstrates both her mastery of conventionally violent depictions of Africa and her ability to craft multiple alternatives to it.

Dilemmas around the politics of representation are greeted in this novel not with renunciation but with creative productivity. Adichie opens up the possibility of finding other, less immediately apparent kinds of representation in her text. One of the most perceptive popular reviews of *Sun* gets to the heart of the novel’s aspirations to transparency: “The prose is admirable, but we’re not meant to admire it. We’re meant to stare through the glass until it disappears, for Adichie possesses a nineteenth-century

confidence in the sufficiencies of traditional narrative.”¹³ In other words, the novel does not wish to call attention to the materiality of its own language: this is not modernist prose style. Whether or not we find Adichie’s representations politically and aesthetically satisfying, the quality of their narration is determined by a will to accessibility, a commitment to plain style that seems to narrow the range of narrative options, making the repetition of troublesomely familiar images and concepts sometimes difficult to evade.

Adichie's refusal of a “single story” of Africa, then, does not necessarily ensure the avoidance of cliché. But as Timothy Bewes has recently pointed out, clichés in contemporary literature are not always bad. They might, he argues, occasion an encounter with the materiality of literature and its relationship to what he calls “the event of shame,” which he defines as “an experience of the dissolution of the consolation of forms.”¹⁴ For Bewes, form “is not limited to literary form but includes ideas, habits of thought, clichés, acts of violence, and concepts in general.”¹⁵ Reading the clichés in Adichie through Bewes’s model thus raises the possibility that a potentially productive shame might be found in the work of an author who, unlike so many twentieth-century postcolonial authors, appears to transcend shame in her willingness to confront history’s traumas and in her apparent confidence in the realist novel as formally equal to the challenge. The possibility that Adichie’s novels have a more complicated relationship to the shame of writing than may be immediately apparent allows us to read ostensibly stereotypical representations as commenting on—or at least making strange—clichéd representation, even where there is no obviously countervailing discourse to be found at the level of narrative. What looks like realism on the brink of the cliché can also be read

as a subtle deployment of defamiliarization, a tactic generally associated with modernism. While writing in a realist plain style, Adichie stages a problem with the idea that reality can be captured through straightforward reflection. The point here is not to re-label this as modernism, but to suggest that Adichie's practice is irreducible to such labels and illustrates their inadequacy.

Rebecca L. Walkowitz has recently noted a tendency in some contemporary anglophone literature toward writing that emphasizes accessibility over idiomatic experimentation, an emphasis she attributes to their being written for translation and global circulation. This process produces novels that she calls "born translated."¹⁶ (570). *Half of a Yellow Sun* easily fits into the "born-translated" category of contemporary novels, which are marked, according to Walkowitz, not only by their avoidance of experimental language, but by their self-consciousness about their own materiality as books. This awareness, Walkowitz argues, can manifest itself through thematic attention to material books and their paratexts, as well as through extradiagetic experimentation with their own paratextual elements, such as typography. In perfect keeping with the tendencies Walkowitz describes, *Sun* includes a book-within-a-book that appears in the form of typographically differentiated excerpts after several of the novel's chapters. Entitled *The World Was Silent When We Died*, this nested book is a retrospective chronicle of the Biafran War that we are at first led to believe is the work of Kainene's lover, Richard, a British intellectual and Igbo art enthusiast. Like the science fiction novel embedded in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, however, it turns out to be the work of another character than the narrative has suggested, namely Ugwu, the houseboy-turned-soldier.

This book-within-a-book fulfills several functions. At the level of plot, it signals the redemption of Ugwu, who, after becoming a rapist under the pressure of historical forces beyond his control, attains a measure of agency and authority in capturing that history on the page. Ugwu's book also functions as a meta-meditation on the ethics of representation. The revelation of Ugwu's authorship stands as the culmination of a gradual removal of authorial power from Richard, whose attempts to make authoritative claims of representation about Nigeria, first as an art student and then as a journalist, continually fail. Adichie portrays his failure, not by showing him as lacking knowledge or ability, but through having his writing materially destroyed. His first manuscript, "The Basket of Hands," is burned by Kainene when she learns that Richard has cheated on her with her twin, Olanna. The burning of the manuscript lays the groundwork for Richard's ultimate self-abnegating transfer of authority to Ugwu: "The war isn't my story to tell, really," he says of his scrapped plans for a history of the Biafran conflict (530). Richard's renunciation of authority could be read as consistent with the ostensibly simple ethics of representation that seems to mark the novel, as well as its marketing: Ugwu, because he is a bearer of African authenticity, is able to tell the story through clear and accessible prose. From this angle, the shame of writing is Richard's alone.

More broadly, however, Ugwu's book functions most interestingly as a complication of what may initially appear as the novel's too-easy investment in realism as a kind of transparency. Adichie participates in the literary conversation about shame that Bewes identifies in current literature, although in a more affirmative way than the authors on whom Bewes focuses, such as Coetzee, Wicomb, and V.S. Naipaul. Through her interest in the various forms that representations take, visual and plastic as well as

verbal, Adichie reminds us that representation is material; it not just a flow of information between speakers and listeners. Though Adichie's *prose style* is invested in transparency, her thematic emphasis on books as material things complicates this investment, reminding us that representation involves an act of making, not just the reflection of some immediately accessible truth. Adichie's writing may eschew appeals to unrepresentability through postmodern play with silence or aporia, but her engagement with realism as a craft undercuts any sense that novels such as hers are unmediated portals into "reality." What makes this way of encountering the gap between form and content affirmative is that Adichie writes African characters such as Ugwu into the process of meaning-making, granting them agency in the international production of knowledge in ways that perhaps allegorize her own career trajectory. *The World Was Silent When We Died* is a clear reference to the book that appears famously at the end of Achebe's foundational classic *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Achebe's book-within-a-book represents the reduction of culture's complexity to the form of an imperial power's ethnography, Adichie's book signifies a reclamation of African authorship.

In doing so it presents a sophisticated reconsideration of the very concepts of authorship and textuality. Consider, for example, how Adichie's narrative resists Roland Barthes's famous division between the Work and the Text. For Barthes, the work "closes on a signified" (158) and is the "object of a consumption."¹⁷ The Text, meanwhile, "practices the infinite deferment of the signified" and depends on "the stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers."¹⁸ It is obvious enough that Adichie's writing opposes itself to Barthesian textualism to the extent that it abjures heteroglossia and

deferral in favor of direct lucidity. The language of her prose is the vehicle of communication, not an end in itself. And yet, not only is a strong postmodern resonance implicit in Adichie's promotion of multiplicity over the "single story," *Sun's* attention to books in their materiality specifically intersects with Barthes's claim that "the Text is experienced only in an activity of production" (157). Like Chris Abani's *GraceLand*, another object of "new realist" scholarship, which goes so far as to incorporate between its chapter breaks complete recipes for its readers to cook at home, *Sun* invites its readers to creative production rather than passive reception. *Sun* achieves this through the above-discussed diegetic portrayal of textual production, the way in which the transfer of authority from Richard to Ugwu is developed not just through plot events but through both metaphorical and typographical reflection on the materiality of texts. The novel further encourages collaborative production through a more noticeable departure from mimetic realism, in its inclusion of an untitled, page-long list of suggested reading on the Biafran War, which includes both historical and fictional titles. Although the citation of sources in an appendix to a historical novel is not in itself unusual, coming at the end of a novel that has thematically, diegetically, and visually asserted its paratextual features, this list provides the final reminder that there is more to books than just the narratives that they contain. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for all of its interest in realistic representation, does not just want to be consumed for its story. The list at the end of the novel demonstrates that textuality, in Adichie's literary world, is a realm of participatory production for writer and reader alike.

The kind of production that interests Adichie, though, seems less like playful postmodernism and more like a modernist investment in artisanal craft. In contrast to

Barthes, Adichie counterbalances textuality with an appreciation for “works.” *Sun*’s bibliographic self-consciousness can be read in two ways, neither of them recognizably realist. On the textualist or postmodern reading, the novel is not a bounded work, but rather a text that flows into its surround. Just as Ugwu’s text exists in relation to the novel, the novel bleeds into its paratexts and its intertexts. To the extent that the book’s interest in its materiality points away from its content altogether, and toward its physical being, it resonates with postmodern aesthetics in another way. For all of the celebration of the novel’s communicative transparency, its gestures toward bibliographic materiality contain an undercurrent of opacity. In its subtle acknowledgment of the extent to which books are things rather than transparent vehicles of meaning, it flirts with what Garrett Stewart would call “book art” or what Michael Fried, in his critique of postmodern aesthetics, would call literalism.¹⁹ Adichie’s transparent realism carries within it hints of its own negation.

At the same time, there is an equally plausible modernist reading in which the concept of the material book can be taken not just as the literal book—the mute, material counter to the novel’s supposed transparency—but as a figure for the Work. In this regard, the material book provides a check on the free play of textuality that the novel courts, asserting the work’s status as a bounded, framed artifact of its maker’s creative labor. For Barthes, the Work exists to be consumed passively by the reader. For Adichie, who is herself clearly concerned about the terms on which literature about Africa is consumed, the category of the modernist, self-contained work has its advantages. Adichie is committed to narrative multiplicity, intertextuality, and participatory reading, but her writing also regularly emphasizes the process of creation as an intending act on the part

of a writer, artist, or craftsman. This approach holds in tension the best aspects of both the Work and the Text, for reasons driven by Adichie's above-discussed concerns about how representations of Africa are mediated. This dialectic between the modernist Work and the postmodernist Text stands as a critically unacknowledged counter to the novel's realism, not to mention the celebration of realism that surrounds her work's popular and critical reception. Adichie's writing is substantially realist, to be sure, but its investment in mimesis is accompanied by frequent reference to poesis, to the creative agency of (African) writers and artists, guarding against the point at which reading for realism becomes a form of data mining.

In turning from the novel's treatment of the relation of textuality and materiality in books towards its diegetic representation of other kinds of art and craft, we will see how even Adichie's paradigmatically realist use of metonymy points beyond itself. The metonymic representation of African expressive culture has been identified by Eileen Julien as a central element of what she terms "the extroverted African novel." By "extroversion," Julien refers not to a quality that inheres in texts, but in their ability to travel beyond their local readership. For an African novel to become extroverted, according to Julien, it must be "characterized above all by its intertextuality with hegemonic or global discourse and its appeal across borders."²⁰ Julien claims that this explains the prevalence of pessimism among the famous African novels, which often focus on the failures of indigenous African system or the disappointments of independence, to the exclusion of popular African literature and other, more exuberantly affirmative forms of expressive culture such as oral traditions, visual art, music, and dance. Extroverted novels must, however, bear what she calls "ornamental" hints of this

indigenous culture in order to appear sufficiently “African” to international readers.²¹ As we have seen, a similar dynamic at work both within *Sun* and in the marketing surrounding it, in which both Ugwu and Adichie herself have to be sufficiently marked as African, but not too unpalatably “other,” for the global market. At the same time, the novel complicates ease of consumption by acknowledging how representation is mediated materially (even if it does not take a sharply critical stance toward it as other postcolonial writers and critics might). Adichie’s interest in materiality is not, however, limited to paratextuality. Her diegetic representation of visual art is crucial to understanding Adichie’s expansive understanding of realist practice. It signals a turn in the African novel toward an embrace of the non-literary expressive culture that, according to Julien, the extroverted African novel has heretofore tended to abject.

Visual art enters the novel through the British character, Richard, whose scholarly ambition, and ultimate renunciation of authority, are mentioned above.²² Richard comes to know about Nigeria through his interest in the bronzes and pottery that were unearthed by archaeological excavations in the town of Igbo-Ukwu during the 1960s. Richard’s passion for these artworks is portrayed as sincere yet worthy of criticism. Richard describes his interest as emerging not from a direct encounter with the art, but from the way in which a scholar explains Igbo-Ukwu work in terms of European art: “I remember the first time I read about Igbo-Ukwu art, in an article where an Oxford don described it as having a strange rococo, almost Fabergé-like virtuosity. I never forgot that--*rococo, almost Fabergé-like virtuosity*. I fell in love even with that expression” (145). Richard’s artistic desires are inextricable from textuality and mediated from the start. That this places Richard within the economy of (African) culture consumption critiqued by the

novel is clear, but Adichie does not portray Richard's curiosity about Igbo-Ukwu art as simply ill-informed and unethical. Olanna contrasts Richard with Kainene's previous British boyfriends: "he did not have that familiar superiority of English people who thought they understood Africans better than Africans understood themselves and, instead, had an endearing uncertainty about him--almost a shyness" (44-45). At another point, Richard is contrasted with British people who see Nigerian art only in terms of market value: "When Richard mentioned his interest in Igbo-Ukwu art, they said it didn't have much of a market yet, so he did not bother to explain that he wasn't at all interested in the money, it was the aesthetics that drew him" (66-67). Richard's aesthetic response, however, recalls the combination of awe and condescension that characterized much primitivist discourse among early twentieth-century modernists. At one point, he exclaims, "It's incredible really, how well-crafted some of the ornaments are, and they were clearly intended to be art; it wasn't an accident at all" (134). The novel takes Richard's love for Igbo art seriously—it ultimately leads to what it sees as his ethically commendable renunciation of authority—without ever turning away from its inevitable implication in the politically uneven relationship between British consumer and Nigerian object. Kainene puts the novel's position most succinctly during an argument with Richard: "it's possible to love something and still condescend to it" (145).

Adichie's decision to take a critical view of Richard's condescension without condescending to him in turn invites us to take him as emblematic of *Sun's* non-African readers, necessarily caught up in global power relations, but ultimately educable. Richard's progression from naive art lover to renouncer of colonial privilege on one level allegorizes the process of education that Adichie, in her Achebean commitment to the

didactic power of novels, so strongly believes in. At the same time, however, Richard also serves as a mouthpiece for the lessons that African art in particular, as opposed to realist literature, have to impart. In one of Richard's journalistic dispatches during the war, he writes, "The notion of the recent killing being the product of 'age-old' hatred is ... misleading. The tribes of the North and the South have long had contact, at least as far back as the ninth century, as some of the magnificent beads discovered at the historic Igbo-Ukwu site attest" (209). Here, Adichie uses Igbo-Ukwu art as metonymic of pre-colonial African history toward advancing the same critique of African violence as "tribal" that she discusses in her nonfiction commentaries on current events. Of course, the earnestness of Richard's appeal to his artistic enthusiasm as evidence for his claim is slightly ironized: his point is not one that should have to be made in the first place, and there may be something questionable about making it with regard to material objects of study as opposed to people. Nevertheless, it matters that in a novel so ostensibly invested in the ability of language to communicate transparently, the nonverbal testimony of objects is given weight.

Not only does Adichie consider the history of Igbo art, she also traces the process through which that history was produced. Adichie has Richard meet with Pa Anozie, a fictionalized member of the actual Anozie family, upon whose land part of the excavation at Igbo-Ukwu took place (the same excavation that, as mentioned in Chapter Three, inspired Achebe to write *Arrow of God*). In this passage, Adichie recreates the story of the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes' initial discovery:

About twenty years ago, his brother was digging a well when he hit something metallic that turned out to be a gourd. He soon found a few

others and brought them out, washed them, and called the neighbors to come in and see them. They looked well crafted and vaguely familiar, but nobody knew of anyone making anything like them. So, word got to the district commissioner in Enugu, who sent somebody to take them to the Department of Antiquities in Lagos. After that nobody came or asked anything else about the bronzes for a while, and his brother built his well and life went on. Then, a few years ago, the white man from Ibadan came to excavate. There were long talks before the work began, because of a goat house and compound wall that would have to be removed, but the work went well. [...] They found such lovely things: calabashes, shells, many ornaments that women use to decorate themselves, snake images, pots. (89)

Here is Adichie's prose style at its most straightforwardly informational. This summary of historical facts is an example of how language so often functions in Adichie's work as a transparent medium of communication. And yet, even as this narrative language seems so disinterested in its own materiality, its accessibility is being mobilized in the service of bringing a particular body of material culture to the fore. While *Sun* is in many ways an example of an "extroverted" African novel in Julien's sense of the term, it pauses to consider at length the non-literary African culture that, in Julien's formulation, the globally-directed novel either treats glancingly or ignores.

The conversation between Richard and Pa Anozie, mediated through Eneka, their translator, continues to address both the history of the archeological findings at Igbo-Ukwu and their historiographic implications.²³ At one point, Richard asks Anozie if the

burial chamber discovered at the site could have been used by an Igbo king:

Pa Anozie gave Richard a long pained look and mumbled something for a while, looking grieved. Emeka laughed before he translated. “Papa said he thought you were among the white people who know something. He said the people of Igboland do not know what a king is. We have priests and elders. The burial place was maybe for a priest. But the priest does not suffer people like king. It is because the white man gave us warrant chiefs that foolish men are calling themselves kings today.” (89-90)

In this short passage, Adichie elegantly encapsulates an important tenet of African studies: the fact that, contrary to popular imagery, many African societies had relatively acephalous political structures, not “chiefs” or “kings.”²⁴ As Pa Anozie recounts, the imposition of monarchical structures was often part of colonial administrators' manipulations. Adichie stages Richard's learning of this lesson, including a lesson for her reader: “[Richard] did not know that the Igbo were said to have been a republican tribe for thousands of years, but one of the articles about the Igbo-Ukwu findings had suggested that perhaps they once had kings and later deposed them. The Igbo were, after all, a people who deposed gods that had outlived their usefulness” (141).

In this last sentence, Adichie follows the tradition of Achebe and other Igbo writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta in including brief pieces of ethnographic information that are succinctly wrapped into the narration. In addition to using art as an occasion to teach, or remind, the reader about the flexible and acephalous nature of Igbo beliefs and political tradition, the novel also reinforces a basic concept of African art history: the fact that African art objects are generally more embedded in

social functions and practices than their decontextualized appearances in Western museums have suggested. Although Richard's initial interest in Igbo art was the result of his response to a written description comparing it to a Fabergé egg, he is aware that of the more socially embedded role of African art and curious about it. He asks Ugwu to take him to see the masked *mmuo* men at the *ori-okpa* festival. The festival is an intertextual reference to Achebe; as we saw in Chapter Three it serves as the site of Igbo art in its full social context in *Things Fall Apart* and even more extensively in *Arrow of God*. In *Sun*, the festival allows Adichie to gently ironize Richard's ethnographic quest for knowledge, while demonstrating to readers who might know that culturally embedded Igbo art, although different from the findings at the Igbo-Ukwu archeological dig, was still available for Richard to see in its ritual context during the 1960s. Ugwu's thoughts on the prospect of Richard's attending the festival highlight the non-museal activities and performances in which the *mmuo*'s masks are embedded: flogging, chasing, parading. Ugwu "could not imagine Mr. Richard during the *ori-okpa* festival, where the *mmuo* (Mr. Richard said they were masquerades, weren't they, and Ugwu agreed, as long as masquerades meant spirits) paraded the village, flogged young men, and chased after young women. The *mmuo* themselves might even laugh at the sight of a pale stranger scribbling in a notebook" (109). When Richard and Ugwu attend the festival, Richard is too preoccupied with reducing the proceedings to language in his notebook to fully witness the proceedings, although Adichie's descriptions inform her readers of the event's visual qualities: "[Richard] hardly noticed the *mmuo*: masculine figures covered in grass, their faces snarling wooden masks, their long whips dangling from their hands. Mr. Richard took photographs, wrote in his notebook, and asked questions, one after

another—what was that called and what did they say and who were those men holding back the *mmuo* with a rope and what did that mean—until Ugwu felt irritable from the heat and the questions” (264).

It is in the passages on Igbo art that the novel's didactic impulses are at their most forceful. But this didacticism is not simple: there is a dual-track educational process at work. On one level, Adichie uses material art as a means of educating non-African readers about basic tenets of African history and art history, as in the above-cited references to political organization. Simultaneously, Richard's mistakes provide an additional lesson about what is to be done with the knowledge readers accumulate from the novel; he becomes an example of how to read the novel's representations of Africa, and how not to. At one point, Okeoma challenges Richard's appreciation for Igbo art in a way that reinforces Kainene's observation on the possible co-existence of love and condescension. He tells Richard that his fulminations about Igbo art's quality bear a hint of surprise, “as if you never imagined *these people* capable of such things” (141). By providing readers with warnings such as those offered by Kainene and Okeoma, the novel seeks to train its audience to read a passage such as the following in a way that is receptive both to the facts it has to offer and to the necessity of absorbing these facts with less naïveté than Richard displays: “Richard sat there for a while, imagining the lives of people who were capable of such beauty, such complexity, in the time of Alfred the Great. He wanted to write about this, to create something from this, but he did not know what. Perhaps a speculative novel where the main character is an archaeologist digging for bronzes who is then transported to an idyllic past” (90). It should be clear that Adichie regards such a romanticized view of Igbo art with arch irony, but at the same time, the

passage does the work of informing readers who do not know that Igbo artistic achievement is at least as old and complicated as Western counterparts. The novel both teaches its readers this fact, *and* teaches them that measuring African culture by Europeans standards is a naive, ethnocentric stance deserving of mockery.

Igbo material culture is thus embedded both in the novel's representations of Nigeria and its meditations on what it means to both transmit and receive these representations. It is thus surprising that Brenda Cooper sees the novel's interest in material culture as evidence of simple essentialism. Literalizing Julien's concept of ornamentalism, Cooper claims that "material objects, like the roped pot, and the use of Igbo words, mutate ... into quite essentialised and monolithic symbols of African culture, thereby falling into the trap of ... 'ornamentalism.'"²⁵ While the realist, metonymic use of material items is in Cooper's view commendable, anything that enters the territory of the metaphorical or symbolic constitutes, for her, a failure of political responsibility. As the novel's interest in material culture progresses, Cooper finds that "Igbo material life begins to metamorphose into tropes of national pride."²⁶ Cooper's divide between metonym and metaphor is in some respects really a divide between the metonyms of everyday life and metonyms of Igbo cultural production that represent non-capitalist and non-Western production. These metonyms call attention to themselves in ways that exceed their function in producing a reality effect, but in doing so, they invite the kind of "strong" metonymic reading that Elaine Freedgood has called for in the context of Victorian studies. Freedgood's method entails following the chain of meaning from the metonym to the larger whole it represents, connecting, for example, the oak furniture in *Jane Eyre* to the history of deforestation in Britain's colonies that made the furniture's appearance in

England possible. Adichie's novel explicitly elicits a very similar kind of reading. It does this by helping the reader who wants to think more about the Igbo art world whose metonyms dot the text, both in the ethnographic and art historical information that enters through Richard and Pa Anozie and through the suggestions for further reading that appear at the end of the novel, not to mention on its web site. In other words, the novel begins on its own to perform what Freedgood might call a "re-materialization" of these art objects, to "understand their value differently, less abstractly."²⁷

Far from being merely ornamental, the art depicted in the book provides a crucial signal of Adichie's aesthetics and ethics of creativity. The material things depicted in the book bear significances that the transparent, realist language in the novel cannot. Beyond the easy flow of information that *Sun's* accessible language seems to make possible, the novel's material metonyms provide an opening toward an alternative realm of creativity and production less readily accessible through narrative. Before doing so, though, the difference between what Adichie is doing and the kind of strict realist reading performed by Cooper bears emphasizing. If we follow Cooper in upholding realism as the supreme criterion, we might be obliged to agree with her that, when Igbo art objects exceed their metonymic fiction in the novel, some sort of failure has occurred on Adichie's part. Reading the less realist moments in the novel as commenting on or experimenting with mimetic representation allows for a richer understanding of the novel's achievement.

As we saw in Chapter three, the world of Igbo art, according to Achebe, is thus characterized by social collectivity, an emphasis on production over consumption, and the possibility of radical formal innovation. If these qualities are not quite in stark opposition to the qualities for which Adichie's work has been marketed and celebrated—

transparency, accessibility, and the dissemination of information—they at least present an alternative set of artistic possibilities. Adichie’s inclusion of the material art world, then, expands the boundaries of a novel that might otherwise be taken as simply a consumable package of African “reality.” The text’s diegetic interest in material culture supplements its apparent lack of interest in the materiality of its own language at the level of style. The critics who celebrate Adichie’s work for its transparency, for its return to a world of untroubled representation, miss her work’s concern with *making and doing*, and how that concern complicates any idea of her writing’s simply reflecting reality for easy consumption. Not only does Adichie resist, as she claims, a “single story” of reality, her work also points beyond the boundaries of the kind of accessible narrative with which she is most readily associated. The congruity between Adichie’s reading of her own work, her statement of its goals, and the positive mainstream critical reception might tempt one to think that her work is, at bottom, the production of an untroubled (African) “reality” as desired by the international market. Despite this, Adichie’s thematic attention to materiality—both materiality of Igbo art and the materiality of writing and books—undermines any such reading. While the novel’s foregrounding of the materiality of books implicitly puts the novel’s own commodified circulation on the agenda, its frequent turns toward Igbo handicrafts, and the acephalous, small-scale political order that they metonymically call up, raises the possibility of an alternative order of creativity and production grounded in the artisanal.

Indeed, both Achebe and Adichie frequently discuss the writing process in language that invokes artisanal making over mimesis. In commenting on a story from Igbo oral tradition about a boy who goes into the forest at night to retrieve a lost flute that

he himself has made, Achebe says, “Making things is very important. Any chance one has ... to smuggle in [to a story] something about making, would be justified in terms of what our traditional culture intended art to do.”²⁸ In her TED talk, Adichie tells a similar story. She recounts how, as a child, she felt pity toward her family's houseboy, a pity she aligns with the misguided pity of those who like to consume sentimental representations of Africa. The young Adichie changes her view of the houseboy and his family when she encounters a dyed raffia basket that they have crafted. This leads her to develop more respect for the family's creative agency: “It had not occurred to me that anyone in his family could actually make something.”²⁹ In both examples, Adichie and Achebe refer to the creation of material culture in their discussions of verbal narratives—and they both do with strenuous emphasis on the word *making*. Neither author proffers a view of creative production in which mimesis is the only goal. Their anecdotes imply not only that non-narrative art is important to them, but also that creation can never be strictly an act of reflective mimesis because creative dynamism is itself such an important component of the real.

Adichie's short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), develops *Sun's* interest in West African arts as well as its investment in craft more broadly, in ways that continue to deepen Adichie's engagement with Achebe.³⁰ In “The Headstrong Historian,” the concluding short story of the collection, handicraft work is explicitly associated with the expansion of literary representation. The story concerns a potter, Nwamgba, an Igbo woman who lives at the time of the colonial encounter. Her son, Anikwenwa, becomes a Christian missionary under the auspices of the British colonial system, but her granddaughter, Grace, eventually re-discovers and embraces her Igbo

heritage (and her Igbo name, Afamefuna). Nwamgba is the wife of Obierika, Okonkwo's wise friend in *Things Fall Apart*; the story is thus something of a feminist sequel to Achebe's novel. The story refers frequently, but as if in passing, to Nwamgba's work at pottery and its place in her social context: "The day that the white men visited her clan, Nwamgba left the pot she was about to put in her oven, took Anikwenwa and her girl apprentices, and hurried to the square" (204); "in her clan girls learned to make pottery and a man sewed cloth" (208). If we can take this story as putting into writing the story that Achebe's original, more masculine-oriented narrative left out, we can also read the material, non-textual nature of Nwamgba's creative work as something to be imaginatively recovered, even with the understanding that her work, which Adichie does not pause to describe in visual detail, must necessarily remain to some extent outside narrative language's boundaries. "The Headstrong Historian," and by extension the collection itself, concludes with Grace/Afamefuna remembering holding her grandmother's hand, "the palm thickened from years of making pottery" (218). Adichie's realist narrative, in all of its accessibility, is profoundly attentive to other modes of creativity that cannot be fully captured by language alone.³¹

Adichie's embrace of non-linguistic expressive culture resonates with the current tendency in much work on contemporary global anglophone literature to turn at least partially away from a focus on narrative in itself, in the narrowly construed verbal or literary sense of the term. These moves range from the paratextual analysis found in work by Huggan and Walkowitz to the more complete shifts away from narrative that occur at the end of two recent books, Bewes's above-cited *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011) and Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations* (2005). Bewes's book moves from

writing to cinema, suggesting that it transcends the shame of writing in ways that postcolonial novels cannot.³² Brown, for his part, turns from literature to popular music as the locus of utopian potential in the contemporary moment.³³ Whereas these models call for abjuring literary narrative as a hopelessly compromised endeavor, Adichie supplements narrative with loving attention to material creations, be they traditional handicrafts or mass-produced books. If this approach falls short of the radical imperative promulgated by Bewes and Brown, it nonetheless has the virtue of revising and expanding the practice of narrative while stopping short of refusing the literary entirely. Adichie disproves claims of the novel's exhaustion, but she does so by recalibrating realist narrative's relation to creativity in general, not by writing realistically in a conservative way.

Appreciating Adichie's treatment of the nexus of textuality, visuality, and materiality in its full complexity allows us to see just how much critical distance she maintains from the traffic in stereotyped or salacious images of African "reality." At the same time, I recognize that the proponents of a realist turn in scholarship on contemporary literature advocate something other than the naïve realism celebrated in some of the rhetoric with which Adichie's books are marketed. Susan Z. Andrade, who has promoted a "reading for realism" approach to African literature in several recent articles, clearly opposes viewing realism as unmediated representation and offers a sophisticated understanding of mimesis as "an act of representation rather than reflection.... the art of giving form, that is to say, the very process of representation itself."³⁴ This definition of mimesis goes some way toward acknowledging the practice of realism as an act of making. To expand the definition of mimesis to include and perhaps

subsume *poiesis*, however, provides a model that can only fail to account for creative agency, even when that when that agency results in a predominantly realist work. The way in which Andrade applies her model of realism to particular works does little to assuage this concern. Her work on *GraceLand*, for example, calls Abani's novel "an imperfectly but significantly realist novel" whose "last three pages ... appear to be narratively unmotivated and are certainly narratively unsatisfying."³⁵ My concern here is not with the accuracy of Andrade's aesthetic judgment or her right to express such an opinion, but rather with the way in which this judgment flow from a standard of realism imposed by the critic rather than the text of its author. It is equally plausible to read the "unsuccessful" moments of realism in the novel as something other than realism, perhaps a metafictional commentary on the hackneyed representation of African suffering, especially given the ways in which *GraceLand*, like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, forcefully and frequently reminds its readers of its bibliographic materiality. The kind of reading exemplified by Andrade, on the other hand, forecloses this possibility by holding novel that is in some significant respects experimental to a mimetic standard—a standard to which Adichie, despite her own fondness for realist technique, refuses to be held.

It is one thing to investigate the extent to which Adichie and other authors of her generation embrace realist technique. It is another thing to allow the designation to circumscribe entirely how their work is interpreted and researched. Nor is such reading "for" realism, contrary to the story told by the new realist proponents, anything new in African literary studies. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, a nonrealist work which is sometimes labeled and "magical realism" and which now seems to be functioning as one of the new realist critics' unnamed targets, was by no means celebrated in African literary

studies for its eschewal of realism. On the contrary, *The Famished Road* and similarly experimental novels such as *Search Sweet Country* (1986) by Kojo Laing and *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990) by Syl Cheney-Coker were read for realism in a highly prescriptive manner. In her book on what she terms these “magical realist” works, Brenda Cooper insists on a strict divide between the mimetic and non-mimetic elements of these work, evaluating them negatively when realism recedes too far for her liking.³⁶ Along similar lines, Ato Quayson’s study of Okri goes so far as to provide a chart of the novel’s “esoteric digressions.”³⁷ In these instances, the privileging of realism involves an invidious kind of analysis that seeks to hold African creators to a pre-determined standard of fealty to the “real.”

For all her interest in realism, Adichie’s work defends itself against such a limiting standard. In doing so, should give scholars pause before they enforce a resolutely anti-experimental rubric, even for work that is substantially realist in approach. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is no less politically or historically serious when it engages with art, materiality, and textuality in ways that stray from realist narrative. In his discussion of “*realism* as a term of value,” Fredric Jameson criticizes “the idea that reality is a kind of thing out there, to be described as faithfully as possible.”³⁸ Jameson’s concerns are especially valid in the context of African literature: the expectation of fidelity to a fixed, external reality entails perilous overlaps with the troubling circulation of stereotypes, the traffic in African “reality” of which Adichie and so many other African writers of her generation are vigilantly aware. Adichie’s work, on the other hand, keeps its own creative agency in view. To read *Half of a Yellow Sun* “beyond realism” is not ultimately to reclassify it under another label or deny Adichie’s own investment in realist technique,

but to remember, as Chinua Achebe once wrote, that the “world of the creative artist is ... not the world of the taxonomist whose first impulse on seeing a new plant or animal is to define, classify and file away.”³⁹ In the same essay, Achebe wrote that he hoped “African literature would define itself in action.”⁴⁰ Adichie’s work reserves the right to be not just a reflection of history, but, as it continues to “define itself in action,” a part of it.

II. From Work to Text and Back to Work Again: Wicomb’s Artisanal Reconstructions

Fanozi “Chickenman” Mkhize (1959-1995) was an artist of Zulu background who worked in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Not formally trained, he created extremely lively and exuberant sculptures from found objects as well as paintings that involve an arresting combination of image and text. Two of his sculptures-on-wheels, *Porcupine* and *Ugandaganda*, use found objects to create works that hold in tension the animal and the mechanical, the sculptural and the dynamic.⁴¹ Mkhize’s “road sign” paintings, *Safe Sex* and *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise* both combine an illustration with paintings of the phrases from which they take their titles. These phrases reference urgent political and public health issues, but they do so in a way that somewhat playfully directs the viewer to their own materiality as letters shaped from paint; the words are presented with spacing and line breaks that do not correspond to conventional grammar. Mkhize’s work stands at the next of high art and artisanal craft, establishing a realm in which any matter of material can become the stuff of art. This vibrant and democratic aesthetic may seem quite distant from the abstractions and austerities of Zoë Wicomb’s fiction, but she is a collector of Mkhize’s work. Indeed, Wicomb’s increasing focus on the visual arts

reveals an unappreciated side of her work that is not as far from the embrace of the artisanal represented by Mkhize as her reputation might lead us to believe.

In turning our attention to Wicomb, we will see that the profound interest with the materiality of literature, books, art objects, and other forms of expressive culture found in the works of such Adichie and Abani is not limited to the youngest authors currently work. It also appears in Wicomb's latest fiction. Wicomb's experimental, postmodern writing has long been associated with poststructuralist theory and criticism. If language has appeared transparent and revealing in Adichie's fiction, it has often appeared in Wicomb's work in ways that might be figured as slippery, ineffable, and ghostly. Although Wicomb's fiction is known for its Derridean excavation of the gulf between language and the objects it seeks to represent, her short story collection *The One That Got Away* (2008), like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, finds its characters frequently making, studying, and interacting with objects of art and material culture. The collection also resonates with Adichie's novel in that its relationship to the materiality of its own language is not precisely what it seems at first pass. Whereas the transparency of Adichie's realism was ultimately challenged by an examination of its artisanal commitments, in this case it is the seemingly postmodern hallmarks of Wicomb's narrative that come to be complicated by a reading of the place of the visual arts in the narrative.

Wicomb's "experimental," "postmodernist," or "poststructuralist" reputation seems bound up with her status as a "post-Apartheid" literary figure. Although her first book, a linked short story collection entitled *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* was published in 1987, her novel *David's Story* attracted a great deal of critical attention as an

avatar of artistic freedom in a (supposedly) less politically charged era of South Africa.⁴² This reception must be understood in the context of South African letters, a context in which debates about the politics of literature have had a particular urgency. The South African critic and writer Njabulo Ndebele has argued against insistences among anti-Apartheid writers during the Apartheid era that writing must show its “commitment” through a realist aesthetic. According to Ndebele, this tendency entailed “an accusatory stance,” an “almost obsessive emulation of journalism,” and an “essentially anthropological approach.”⁴³ Against this view of literature’s political imperatives, Ndebele identifies in the literature of the late Apartheid era what he terms a “rediscovery of the ordinary” that allows for both a broader range of subject matter than the direct treatment of South Africa’s political crisis. It also allows for more freedom for formal experimentation. Especially in the context of questions about truth and narrative raised by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Wicomb’s work poses a profound challenge not just to realist literature but to representation itself.

Indeed, *David’s Story* brings together postcolonial studies and poststructuralist theories of writing as forcefully as does the scholarly work of Gayatri Spivak. The novel presents itself as a manuscript about the South African revolutionary, David Dirkse, but it includes extensive meta-commentary from its unnamed writer. Rather than providing a straightforward biography of David, the narrator reflects on and demonstrates the impossibility of doing so by openly addressing her conflicts with David, by interpolating parallel narratives about South Africa in the nineteenth century, and by creating the composite character Dulcie, a torture victim. Early on in the novel, Wicomb signals the novel’s explicit investment in deconstruction: “[L]et us not claim a beginning for this

mixed-up tale. Beginnings are too redolent of origins” (8-9). Along with resistance to origins, the novel explicitly invokes such Derridean concepts as the trace, the supplement, “meaning in the margin” and “absence as an aspect of writing” (2).

The antifoundationalism espoused by Wicomb’s narrator represents a post-Apartheid questioning of the liberation struggle’s enabling certainties. David, however, defends political certainty throughout the novel, arguing that linguistic experimentation is a politically conservative distraction. For David, political responsibility entails both a strict divide between politics and aesthetics—“Aesthetics, he said, should be left to the so-called artists” (3)—and an emphasis on uniformity over postmodern interest in difference: “David has long since overcome his adolescent distaste of uniforms and now has no patience with arguments about individuality” (76); “In the Movement [gender differences] are wiped out by our common goal” (78). The narrator exerts her authorial power by moving a political slogan—“Nkosi sikilele iAfrika—God Bless Africa / Viva the Struggle, Viva!” (3)—from the end of the text, where David wanted it, to the beginning, where she hopes the words “will serve another function” (3). The narrator leaves this function unspecified, but her edit clearly serves to hold the expression of political authenticity in tension with countervailing forces of doubt about language’s ability to unproblematically serve political needs. In Derridean language, the edit places the political battle cry under erasure. At the same time, the narrator’s scrupulous self-consciousness about her editorial incursions places her own writing choices under erasure; the urgency of David’s anti-Apartheid political agenda is never downplayed. The novel holds both David’s and the narrator’s views on politics and language in suspension without necessarily choosing sides, or asserting that the two positions are mutually

exclusive.

Throughout *David's Story*, the relationship between language and violence is often intertwined. This relationship is made most clear with regard to his fellow militant, Dulcie Olifant, a casualty of the anti-Apartheid struggle, much of whose story is ultimately revealed to be the fabrication of the narrator. Dulcie's role in the novel has been described as "emblematic of that in the work which does not represent but is represented."⁴⁴ In the following passage, the narrator attempts to make sense of David's notes about Dulcie. The scene exemplifies the idea that violence exceeds language's ability to represent it:

Although I have made numerous inferences from that last page, I do not quite know how to represent it. It is a mess of scribbles and scoring out and doodling of peculiar figures what cannot be reproduced here. I know that it is his attempt at writing about Dulcie, because her name is written several times and struck out. Then there are beginnings scattered all over, and at various angles that ignore the rectangularity of the paper, as if by not starting at the top or not following the shape of the page he could fool himself that it is not a beginning, [...] Truth, I gather, is the word that cannot be written. He has changed it into the palindrome of Cape Flats speech—TRURT, TRURT, TRURT, TRURT—the words speed across the page, driven as a toy car is driven by a child, with lips pouted and spit flying, wheels squealing around the Dulcie obstacles. (135-136)

In this passage, words become mere ink and paper rather than bearers of Dulcie's traumatic history. Wicomb underlines the point by singling out the word "truth" for

distorting repetition. Throughout the novel, the inaccessibility of truth to language affronts the narrator's belief, contra David, that "[t]here is no such thing ... as a story that cannot be told" (151). Near the end of the novel, in a somewhat surprisingly comic turn, the narrator's computer becomes a participant in her struggles with the maddeningly disjunctive relationship between meaning and language. At first, the computer, "embarrassed" (136), rejects the ellipses that serve as visual markers of lack and undecidability in the narrator's manuscript (137). If in this instance the computer seems to insist on the satisfactions of conventional language, it becomes in its spectacular final act an agent of deconstruction taken to a destructive extreme. It erases the manuscript of the narrator, who receives a "queer message in bold: *this text deletes itself*" (212).

In the figure of the self-deleting text, Wicomb has found an image for the utter failure of written language to represent the truth. The deletion of the text within the novel signals that *David's Story* is itself a self-deleting work, a reading borne out by the renunciation with which the novel ends. "The words escape me," writes the narrator, who concludes her own text as well as the novel with the following disavowal: "I wash my hands of this story" (213). In the novel's dialectic of inscription and erasure, Wicomb seems to come as close as possible to the representation of the unrepresentable without retreating from the linguistic all together. Where can prose fiction go from here? *David's Story* contains some hints of where Wicomb's work will turn after this sounding of the linguistic abyss. At moments in the novel's treatment of its least describable reality—the unspeakable violence done to Dulcie, and the other victims whom she signifies—Wicomb considers how these histories are recorded in at least partially non-linguistic ways. At one point, the narrator imagines that Dulcie has referred to Toni Morrison's

Beloved in discussing her physical scars with David, comparing her to “a woman in *Beloved* whose back is scarred and who nevertheless is able to turn it into a tree” (19). In this reference to Sethe, the famous enslaved mother of Morrison’s novel, Wicomb’s narrator turns from writing as the means of memorializing politics and history toward the body itself as the grounds of both recording and creatively transforming traces of violence. Later, Wicomb’s narrator imagines Dulcie’s name on a government hit list: “[T]he name in writing takes on a different hue, lifts out from the rest of the girlish script and starts to tremble in a flush of red, the fancy strokes disintegrating, the letters separating as the colour grows deeper and deeper until they disappear entirely in a pool of blood. Dulcie’s blood” (114). This image underscores the difficulty of representing violence in language, but at the same time the novel paradoxically suggests its own ability to at least point toward a visual, extra-linguistic representation. The dominant image in *David’s Story* is surely that of the self-deleting text—of text as immaterial, vanishing flashes of electronic light that can only fail to capture history’s intractable realities. Nonetheless, there are moments within the novel that suggest the ways in which the act of writing, rather than spiraling inevitably into silence and aporia, can be imagined as a material act productively allied to other kinds of non-linguistic materiality.

If *David’s Story* contains occasional turns toward materiality with specific reference to the physical, specifically the embodied experience of violence, Wicomb’s next books forcefully emphasize writing’s intersection with material, artisanal creativity. This turn signals a different approach to the abyssal challenges of writing that can be understood as the negotiation of a new understanding of writing as a creative act, and with writing’s affinities with other kinds of creativity in other media. Wicomb’s first

novel after *David's Story*, *Playing in the Light* (2006), is a more conventionally realist work than its heavily metafictional predecessor. Set against the backdrop of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's proceedings, this novel tells the story of Marion Campbell, a travel agency owner who believes herself to be white until learning that her parents were "play-whites," that is, "coloured" people who passed for white and obtained white identity cards from the apartheid-era government. At one point in the narrative, Marion is traveling with Brenda, her first non-white employee and an aspiring writer. They encounter a stranger named Outa Blinkoog, "a man in harness, dragging behind him a ramshackle cart decorated with outlandish shiny things and streamers of coloured cloth, piled high with objects made of beaten, painted and pierced tin, including what look like toy windmills, whirring in the movement of the cart."⁴⁵ Marion is uncomfortable at the approach of this itinerant black man, but she and Brenda converse with him and learn that he is a writer who shares his stories through embroidery rather than writing or print. His stories, which are of "children in a schoolroom, an inspector towering over them; of two women he loved sitting side by side; of the pepper tree in which he lives in summer, but with the confetti of jacaranda, for he has seen such heavenly blueness in the town and has carried the picture with him ever since. But such a shower of blue can't be told, can't be drawn in the sand, and can't be made into tin treasures. That is why he would rather have his stories embroidered on white cloth" (88). Outa Blinkoog's discussion of the gap between the color blue and the linguistic attempt to capture it resonates with the poststructuralism of *David's Story*, but unlike that novel's concluding metaphor of ineffable, self-deleting words on a computer screen, Blinkoog experiences language as embedded in a messy, material world of creatively repurposed things. His cloths are his

“chapters” (89). Marion and Brenda accept a gift of a lantern from Blinkoog; Brenda ultimately finds that the refracted light from this colorful object cures her writer’s block.

This episode in *Playing in the Light* signals an opening toward a material or artisanal turn in Wicomb’s writing that becomes explicit in her most recent book, the short story collection, *The One That Got Away* (2008).⁴⁶ This material turn is evident both in Wicomb’s formal decisions and in the collection’s significant thematic interest in art, artists, museums and monuments. Like *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, *The One That Got Away* is a collection of linked stories that falls somewhere between being a novel and a conventional story collection. Its stories map various connections between South Africa and Scotland, with characters appearing and reappearing in multiple stories. At the level of style, Wicomb’s writing in these stories is neither the overt postmodern experimentation of *David’s Story* nor the conventionally transparent realism that generally characterizes *Playing in the Light*. Instead, these stories are written in a moderately dense, if not expressly poetic, prose that subtly calls attention to their status as crafted, finely wrought language. In combining this formal approach with the collection’s diegetic interest in the material arts, Wicomb fashions a new way of rigorously engaging with post-Apartheid politics in a transnational context. Just as Outa Blinkoog’s lantern provides a supplement that enables Brenda’s writing career to flourish, Wicomb’s turn to art and material culture signals a new way of coming to terms with the slippage between writing and its objects, making a new peace with writing as a kind of artisanal creative labor. Although the stories are frequently more personal and indirect in their treatment of politics than their predecessors—the collection is to some degree Wicomb’s “rediscovery of the ordinary”⁴⁷—they ultimately support Ndebele’s

point that experimental form can allow for a full and creative engagement with politics.

Three stories in the collection signal this turn in Wicomb's work through thematic attention to the visual arts and the diegetic representation of these works, while the title story makes art's relation to writing manifest in its full complexity. The first three stories—"Boy in a Jute-Sack Hood," "Disgrace," and "There's the Bird that Never Flew"—feature several characters in common: Grant Fotheringay, a Scottish-born professor living in South Africa; Fiona McAllister, a Scottish poet with whom Grant was once in love; Grace, the elderly maid of Fiona's South African friend Shirley; Jane, Grace's daughter, and Jane's husband, an artist named Drew Brown. In some cases the stories are linked not only by common characters but also by works of art that appear at different points in the collection. The most important of these is an actually existing public monument, the Doulton Fountain on the Glasgow Green in Scotland. This large sculpture—the world's largest terracotta fountain—was designed in honor of Queen Victoria's 1887 Golden Jubilee. A five-layer fountain more than forty feet high and seventy feet wide, the monument celebrates the reach of British imperialism with statues that represent cultures from across the Empire. We are first introduced to the fountain through the eyes of Grant, whose compromised politics Wicomb archly highlights. Although he is writing "a new project on literature and ethics" (20), he came to South Africa in 1984, unaware of the academic boycott against the Apartheid state. He refers to Black South Africans as "these people" (16), and spends much of the story "Boy in a Jute-Sack Hood" engaging in a patronizing, racially freighted relationship with his gardener's son, the boy referred to in the story's title, until the gardener puts a stop to it. Unlike the overt discussions of politics that permeate *David's Story*, however, the

political stances of the characters, along with their races, national origins and other social characteristics, are often downplayed or revealed gradually in these stories. This subtle approach is exemplified in a passage in which the formation of Grant's politics is suggested through his youthful experience of the Douulton Fountain: "There a child from the Gorbals could escape to far-off lands via the terracotta tableaux of the colonies. [...]Trailing his red kite, he became an explorer, a discoverer of things that no Glaswegian had dreamt of; he wandered through weird vegetation, slew the giants of Africa and sailed off to India. [...]But best of all was the ostrich with a long snake-neck and full, soft feathers like the girl's bosom, an image that ...brought...dreams of coupling with a continent" (10-11). Rather than labeling Grant's political beliefs, this passage combines ekphrastic description with an exploration of the shaping ideological force of visual culture on individuals. Wicomb's prose moves easily between free indirect discourse and omniscient narration, thus encompassing both the adolescent Grant's individual, psychosexual response to the monument and the sculpture in all of its broader geopolitical import.

Grant's imaginative relationship to the statue is not unlike that of the young Marlow's fascination with the blank spaces on the map in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In both cases, an apparently personal, aesthetic response is shaped by, and in its turn advances, imperialist ideology. But whereas Marlow's interest in flat, blank spaces on the map is ultimately superseded by the three dimensional horror of experience, the fountain's sensuous, sculptural qualities remain evocative well into Grant's uneventful adulthood. More importantly, the Douulton Fountain is one of the works of art in Wicomb's book that ground and enable a renegotiation of language's relationship to the

materiality of the visual and plastic arts. This renegotiation does not entail a simple return to the idea that language can unproblematically represent its object, be that object a work of art or the truth of history. Instead, it marks a willingness to move on with the act of literary creation in spite of having stared into the abyss. *The One That Got Away* nonetheless contains reminders that the insights of poststructuralism have not been forgotten or denied. In fact, Grant's reverie about the fountain is occasioned by a discussion of the slipperiness of language that would not be out of place in *David's Story*. After musing that he is "at a loose end," Grant ponders the cliché: "These are his own words. He has said them aloud ... There seems to be no accounting for the words that slither in to the mind ... What does it mean to be at a loose end? Grant thinks images: a rope dangling from a mizzen sail" (9). *Grant thinks images*. Such a line would have been subject to scrutiny in the earlier novel, pushed to an aporetic impasse. In *The One That Got Away*, this mutual dependency of word and image is described with evident acceptance, and practiced throughout the rest of the collection, by the characters as well as their author.

The Doulton Fountain returns in the collection's fifth story, "There's the Bird That Never Flew," seen this time through the eyes of Jane, the daughter of Grace, a Griqua housemaid who disapproves of the experimental works of Drew, Jane's artist husband. On a trip to Scotland, Janie visits the Doulton Fountain that enchanted Grant (who is an acquaintance of his mother's employer) so many years earlier. In contrast to Grant's imperialist reverie, Jane reads the sculptures from a critically anticolonial perspective—while engaging in a broader contemplation of what it is to describe a work of art in words. Upon seeing the fountain, she asks herself: "Can a monument be a work

of art?” (65). Jane thinks about her mother, who would appreciate the statue’s realist depiction of human figures in contrast to Drew’s works. She thinks also about Drew, who adheres to a philosophy that W.J.T. Mitchell would describe as “ekphrastic hope,”⁴⁸ confidence in the ability to capture art in words: “Drew insists that there is nothing to it, nothing arcane about looking at art. It’s just about giving it time, attention, looking carefully, because if you can describe a work accurately, you’re more than halfway towards understanding what’s going on” (69). Jane, who “wishes she didn’t care about not making sense of visual things” (67), is not sure if monument counts as art, but feels enabled by this very uncertainty to begin asking questions about the structure: “Jane has by now formulated a number of questions about the figures, even if it is not a work of art, but she revises that – perhaps it’s *because* it is not art that she is able to do so” (67). Rather than expanding on Jane’s questions, however, Wicomb shows Jane engaged in a careful ekphrasis of the monument, following her patient accumulation of descriptive detail.

The story thus picks up the ekphrasis of the Doulton Fountain begun by Grant’s flashback in the collection’s opening story. Like the interrupted and resumed ekphrasis in *Women in Love* discussed in Chapter One, this second round of ekphrastic description provides information that was withheld in the first descriptive passage, in this case the historical background of the Fountain’s purpose already alluded to above. More significantly, the passage sheds additional light on Wicomb’s new engagement with materiality. First, though, the ekphrasis begins with the kind of simple description advocated by Drew: “There is water in abundance—fountaining, spouting, or gushing from gargoyles. In shifting shapes, from clear arcs to extravagant spumes, in trickles or

cascades, the water is white against the terracotta structure, bone white against the figures in marble” (67). In a collection of brief and moderately elliptical stories, the sustained description, in particular the use of adjectives, is notable. The turn from plot to description slows the narrative. In other words, it moves from temporality to the spatiality of the sculpture in its three-dimensional plasticity. And yet, this is not the purely formal plasticity desired by such a modernist as Roger Fry. Jane’s ekphrasis becomes an occasion to consider the history and politics of the Fountain from a Griqua perspective, especially in its reading of the classically rendered water carriers who are situated beneath Queen Victoria in the monument, and whom Jane compares to the “rain sisters” of Griqua folk culture: “The Queen’s water carriers are ... a far cry from the rain sisters. The four life-sized, elegant maidens vary only slightly in the curve of their torsos as they tilt pitchers of water over the colonial tableaux below. Really it is Queen Victoria at the apex who deserves a good dousing, if only to shatter that plump smugness” (69-70).

Jane’s ekphrasis entails a reversal of the ekphrastic relationship discussed at the beginning of this dissertation. Here, a piece of art from the British Empire is treated as the object of inquiry, and judged in part by the standards of Griqua culture. The Doulton Fountain is read for the ways in which it exemplifies imperialist values, but these are contrasted with the indigenous culture that the rain sisters represent. The history of the rain sisters’ method of cooling water in the desert, which has been passed down to Jane from her mother, undercuts the imperial “civilizing” mission that the monument celebrates. Jane has moved from the task of modest description of the monument to a meditation on what it leaves out.

Jane then turns her attention back to the fountain, to find that her continued

attention to it will yield a surprising discovery. While most of the people from around the empire are depicted on the fountain as phenotypically Caucasian, Jane—after sustained study of the fountain—discovers an exception: “How could she not have noticed before, for there in the niche, sitting cool as a cucumber in the Glasgow chill, is a young woman, no more than a girl, but unmistakably coloured. Jesus, she says aloud; she has not been looking properly after all, has missed the girl in all that elaborate Victorian detail and modeled in the same white stone as all the other figures” (71). “Looking properly” for Jane means taking the time to find evidence of resistance in the onslaught on detail. It also, Wicomb implies, means moving from this detail back to a larger political analysis: “South Africa, then, comes to offer a different kind of knowledge. Astonishing quite unbelievable that more than hundred years ago, miscegenation was celebrated in a public work here in the ‘centre’” (71).

Jane’s reading is supported by the presence of a white South African farmer next to the woman whose features she identifies as Khoisan (76-77). Molding her ekphrastic observations into a fictional narrative, Jane names the woman Kaatje and imagines that she and the farmer beside her are lovers: “The brush of clothing and the symmetries, the repeated verticals of spade and rifle in contact with each left hand, are metonymies of matter-of-fact intimacy. They are unmistakably a couple” (77). The reference to repeated verticals here show that the narrativization of the statue does not involve a total refusal of ekphrasis’s spatializing tendencies in favor of temporal storytelling, even as Wicomb’s use of the word “metonymies” suggests a realist mode of reading on Jane’s part. (The word also reminds us that Wicomb’s engagement with literary theory and its specialized language, most prevalent in *David’s Story*, has not dissipated entirely.) At the same time,

however, Jane's final assessment of Kaatje's presence in the monument culminates in nothing less than a reconciliation of the modernist qualities of plasticity, paradox, stillness, and otherness with an anti-imperialist, postcolonial politics:

Kaatje's posture and facial expression tell that she is not a servant; she occupies her space with ease, not regally like Victoria, for she feels no need to claim space, no need to assume an imperious pose. Her limbs under the inappropriate, riding attire are relaxed, feet planted firmly on the ground, as if savouring a rest from toil. Her slanted Khoisan eyes gaze out brightly at the world, with neither arrogance nor humility, rather, with calm curiosity as if she knows of her transportation to the metropolis and does not mind at all. Her difference its not a burden, and hence the astounding paradox of a sculpted figure who will not be an image; she cannot be subjected to anyone's gaze. No wonder Jane had missed seeing her. Whilst her descendants at the Cape have been either cringing with shame or living up to the Kekkelbek portrait, Kaatje has been sitting here bathed in grace for more than a century, unembarrassed. (77)

Jane has devised a politics of visibility in which Kaatje's being frozen in sculpture does not mean that she has been "killed into art," but rather that her presence among the assembly of statues in the Doulton Fountain effects a kind of redemption. The fact that Kaatje is fixed in terracotta means that her presence will continue to haunt the fountain's monument to the British Empire, offering a subversive counter-history to those who take the time to look as carefully as Jane has. The slow accumulation of detail has yielded a reward—a reward that proves more political than aesthetic. This small triumph of the

politics of ekphrastic patience has not only reversed the terms of the subject-object/verbal-visual binaries discussed throughout this dissertation, it deconstructs this very opposition.

If, as the first chapter of this dissertation has argued, African art objects maintain some ability to resist appropriation and incomprehension, “The Bird That Never Flew” demonstrates the possibility that art from the imperial center may, even in spite of itself, contain alternative perspectives, both visual and historical. Of course, the idea that Kaatje is “a figure who will not be an image” and who “cannot be subjected to anyone’s gaze” is belied by the fact that the story’s climax is set in motion by Jane’s ability to see her. But the overt utopianism of this proclamation is all the more noteworthy for the tension with which it stands in relation to much of Wicomb’s work, to the constant complication of the political in *David’s Story* and also to the more muted, small-scale subject matter of *The One That Got Away*. The story’s very willingness to imagine investing a work of art with impossible power reveals that it considers the visual arts as a zone of radical potential. Although it is only one moment in a Jane’s contemplation, which is rich with both ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic doubt, this apotheosis of Kaatje the statue stands in sharp contrast to the skepticism about artistic responses to colonial and racist violence in *David’s Story*. There is, however, an explanation for the difference. While in the earlier novel, this issue is framed as a hopelessly slippery relation between language and the social real, in the more recent work language exists in a symbiotic relationship with visual and material creations. The power of resistance embodied in the Kaatje statue can only be enacted by Jane’s creation of a narrative for it. At the same time, the story’s willingness to dwell on description in addition to narrative forces readers

to consider the statue's sculptural qualities, and the fact that these qualities exist beyond the realm of words: Jane's case for the triumph of Kaatje-as-sculpture is made using words that recognize their inability as words to fully capture Kaatje's being. The assertion that Kaatje is a figure who refuses to be an image suggests a celebration of three-dimensionality (plasticity, in Fry's sense of the term) over being an easily readable image of something else.⁴⁹

The Kaatje sculpture signals that, in these stories, language is at its greatest potential when it approaches the visual, and the visual is at its greatest potential as it approaches materiality, solidity, tactility. In "Disgrace," which focuses on Jane's mother, Grace, the power of tactility comes to the fore. Grace, a 74 year-old housekeeper, is employed in South Africa by Shirley Haskins, a white art collector. Shirley receives a visit from Fiona McAllister, a Scottish poet and former anti-Apartheid activist (and former love interest of Grant Fotheringay). Fiona's interest in South African culture is portrayed as touristic and condescending: she wants to visit a "coloured township" out of curiosity (26), and Grace looks askance as Fiona takes in Shirley's personal art collection, which is "packed with what's called transitional art from the townships...wood carvings and artefacts made of telephone wire" (28). Grace, whose antipathy to her son-in-law's experimental art has already been mentioned, is equally suspicious of the "transitional art" emerging from her own milieu in the townships: "she cannot believe how easily these people from overseas are taken in. Just a load of old rubbish made by the layabouts and dagga-rokers, she says helpfully; they're nothing but skelms setting out to rob innocent people, especially the ones from overseas who've got now a lo-ot of money" (28). As in the other stories, Wicomb employs free indirect

discourse with particular alacrity in the passages of the story that involve visual art, and the story's wording with regard to "what is called" transitional art implies that Grace's qualms about township art's place in the international market are also in part Wicomb's. The art historian Sidney Littlefield Kasfir's gloss on the term "transitional art" helps to clarify why this might be:

South Africa is somewhat different in that it alone has a largely indigenous, mainly white and educated, patron/collector base. It also has artificially created 'homelands' which became repositories of 'authentic' African culture for white city dwellers. It has more galleries, curator and other artworld institutions than any other African state and has a class of vigilant intellectuals who, long having been unwilling participants in the apartheid system, are prone to continual self-examination and the search for a 'real' South African art. Beginning in 1980, certain new productions which until then had only been available to visitors in the rural homelands were brought into the gallery circuit and labeled 'transitional art,' in the sense of being neither 'traditional' (i.e., intended for ritual or domestic use), nor 'modern' (i.e., being part of high-art notions of uniqueness).⁵⁰

Shirley's art collection, and Fiona's reaction to it, support Kasfir's analysis of transitional art as a potentially problematic concept. Shirley represents the established art market of affluent white South Africans that, in Kasfir's discussion, absorbs art from the townships into its pre-existing circuits of exchange, while Fiona's appreciation of it represents the cosmopolitan audience in a self-congratulatory search for "authenticity."⁵¹

Grace imagines an artistic alternative to Shirley's collection: "she could direct

Miss McAllister to a chap who really is good with his hands, who makes toys and stuff with wire and old bits of tin that look exactly like the real things” (28-29). Grace’s preference for representational art has been mentioned above, in Jane’s comment that her mother would appreciate the realism of the statues on the Doulton Fountain. In this iteration, however, Grace’s aesthetic is shown to value not simply realism but individual handicraft. It is clear that Grace’s appreciation of these hand-made toys lies not entirely in their resemblance to “the real thing,” but in the way that resemblance bears witness to the artisanal labor that went into turning wire and tin into recognizable toys. Grace’s freedom from concern for the market status or ethnic provenance of arts and crafts is underscored by her attraction to Fiona’s scarf, an aesthetic response that sets in motion the story’s plot. For Grace, the scarf is “the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. Silk, she supposes, and in shimmering blues and greens that flow into each other, exactly the colour of the sea on Boxing Day” (24). While ironing and folding Fiona’s clothing on the eve of Fiona’s departure, Grace surprises herself by stealing the object of her desire: “As if mesmerized, she tugs at the fabric, watches it snake through the tangle of garments as she lifts it out of the bag. Grace rises, holds the scarf in both hands, runs it through her fingers, and in the glorious silence hears the swish of silk, the rush of water, of the tide foaming over shiny wet boulders” (34-35). This second encounter with the scarf—touching it as well as regarding it—catalyzes a synesthetic reverie that Grace cannot resist. Grace immediately regrets her theft when, in the story’s conclusion, she learns that Fiona has left her a tip of one hundred rand.

Grace’s response to the scarf may seem a slight, personal whim, but *The One That Got Away* insists on the importance of such interactions—and it uses its diegetic

representations of visual and material culture to tie the personal and the small-scale to more macro-level political issues. This approach entails taking seriously the aesthetic perspective of a character who does not speak in the specialized language of art criticism or the art market. Grace's aesthetic valorization of handicraft and tactility provides an implicit critique of the consumption of "authentic" African imagery characterized by Shirley's collecting practices. In a complication characteristic of Wicomb's work, however, the story also has Fiona making a similar critique, despite her complicity with it in other regards. Here is another of the collection's passages in which ekphrastic attention is lavished, not upon a piece of "high" art as has been the general ekphrastic tradition, but on an item of popular, mass-produced visual culture, in this case a tourist postcard:

Fiona had kept the card purely for the pictures, captioned at the back as 'Wall decoration – The Three Hunters – traditional skills incorporating contemporary ideas'. She found it without difficulty, and examined again the photograph of a traditional Venda house with thatched roof, painted white and ochre in decorative scallops. Three identical clay figures dangled long, parallel legs over the wall of the homestead. Their torsos were foreshortened, as if below, immediately behind the wall, there was a hidden bench on which the male figures were actually seated, with thighs raised, and knees resting on the wall over which their legs dangled. Each wore a hat and held in his hands something (the clay moulding was rough), a fan-tailed bird perhaps, that reached up to the shoulder. To their left, on the same wall, was a bas relief of a gun pointing at a wiggly blue-and-white spotted snake. Traditional skills! Fiona laughed out loud. She

imagined revolutionaries fobbing off the neighbouring white farmers with a story of hunters, the stiff formality of the shortened figures passing off as folk-naïve style. She knew that Grant too would have seen the hunters' bearing as military, an illegal depiction of armed resistance, the catch ambiguously batoned against each left shoulder like a gun, standing in for a gun, and the actual gun on the wall, innocent and faux-naïf. How the people must have split their sides at the slapstick of stern soldiers with their hidden bottoms, a code that the Boers had failed to crack. Fiona would like to find that village in Venda, see if the tableau is still there, now surely a monument to freedom. (30-31)

As in the portrayal of the Doulton Fountain, the postcard is described with the attention to visual detail more frequently reserved for an *objet d'art*. At the same time, it is critiqued in ways that reveal both Fiona and Grant to be, despite their personal shortcomings, capable of sophisticatedly considering the politics of representation. Fiona's reading of the postcard exposes its manipulation of indigenous art, even as it recognizes the specific Venda provenance of the works depicted. Beyond this, it reimagines the tableau it describes as a monument to freedom: just as Jane did with regard to the Kaatje statue, Fiona attaches a fictional narrative to her ekphrasis, a narrative that imagines a politically effective afterlife for an image that is initially portrayed as hopelessly compromised by imperialism's depredations. Both Fiona and Grace relate to art in ways that comprehend a non-hierarchical relation among word, image, and thing. The gun referred to in the picture—surely the political power of the resistance fighters in its most overtly material form—survives its translation into bird, then into two-dimensional image, then into

language in Fiona's ekphrasis. Fiona's language, moreover, is used to imagine that the images of the fan-tailed bird and the gun signified beyond and without the use of words for those engaged in the struggle.

Wicomb has discussed the potential of visual art as a substitute for or supplement of verbal expression in ways that suggest a more positive take on "transitional" art. Citing the artists Derek Nxumalo and Tito Zungu, as well as Mkhize, Wicomb states in an essay that visual arts in late-twentieth-century South Africa serve an important function for artists and audiences to whom literacy may have been denied in whole or in part. These are, however, artists who incorporate text into their visuals to, in Wicomb's words, "engage directly with writing and with language as social semiotic. Their images have in common an interest in issues of communication and their orthographic inscription in the geo-social terrain."⁵² While her language in describing these artists illustrates her obvious comfort with the theoretical language of scholarly criticism, her point, which is that language is a usable artistic material and not just a web of endless deferral, implies that her fiction's apparent applicability to postmodern theory has been too quickly assumed by many scholars at the expense of its commitment to craft. Wicomb's abiding concern with what she calls the "mundane material of language" that "literary arbiters so often forget"⁵³ makes the combination of art and text both possible and desirable. Although the art objects in this story are not described as including orthographic or textual images, the story itself performs the combination of art and text in its own literary way.

It is the collection's title story that makes most explicit Wicomb's weaving of a new partnership between linguistic and extra-linguistic modes of representation. "The One That Got Away" focuses on Drew and his artwork. Drew, who has a critical

reputation for “mature iconoclasm” (38), is a postmodern artist—he “thinks of the author as dead” (42)—who is working on collaborative project about mining in South Africa with his friend, Stan-the-Man. Based on the memory of his childhood practice of defacing books, he begins a new series of works that alter and manipulate pre-existing physical volumes. Drew’s memory of his childhood practice of transforming his Fowler & Smit textbook resonates with the personal, meaning-making, relation between individual and object exemplified by his mother-in-law, Grace (despite the fact that she disdains Drew’s work): “Drew used five colours of ballpoint pen and an HB pencil, leaving none of the text unmarked, and as his ruler slid into angles and verticals, the pages turned into dazzling works, every one of them different. In the first row, almost under [his teacher’s] nose, he bent industriously over his book, and the project of turning every printed page of Fowler & Smit into something new, was all the more exciting for being a secret act performed so publicly” (38). The memory of creative re-purposing is triggered when Drew encounters a library book, a Scottish mystery entitled *The One That Got Away*, and is moved to steal it so that he can scrape off its embossed title, paint over it, and change it to *Gold Mining in South Africa* (41-42). He takes a special interest in the way in which the lending history of the book reflects the travels of an individual volume: “He flicked through the book and gathered that it was a mystery set in the Scottish highlands. Not his kind of thing, but it was the object and its history rather than the text that interested him” (45).

The title of the book that becomes Drew’s material puts the materiality of literature forcefully on the reader’s agenda: *The One That Got Away* is a book within a story of the same name, which is itself within a book of the same name. But this is not

simply a metafictional game of *mise-en-abyme*. The story's acknowledgment of its place in the book that is in its reader's hands emphasizes the relationship between language and its material manifestations that is also illustrated in Drew's artwork. Drew's literal experimentation with text and materiality is, however, only the most emphatic display of the symbiosis of language and extra-linguistic creativity that is operational throughout this collection of stories, a view of language profoundly different from that of self-deleting words on a computer screen in *David's Story*. Whereas the earlier novel sounds the depths of language's failure to capture reality, *The One That Got Away* accepts language as a medium from which new meanings can be made, especially with the assistance of other kinds of creation such as visual art. It is a shift of emphasis from reflecting meaning to making it. (That language can, in turn, enhance art is equally proclaimed by the stories, particularly in the politicized fictions attached to the status and the postcard by Jane and Grace.)

Like *David's Story*, and unlike most other stories in the collection, "The One That Got Away" contains a metafictional interjection from its author/narrator. Unlike the narrator's metacommentary in the novel, however, this interjection focuses on the story that is in the process of being crafted, not on its impossibility. At first, this narrator mentions Jane, who has been left in the town square for much of the story's action: "Should she get bored, I could wheel in a juggler or a clown since the terraced space on the ground floor is large enough to accommodate a number of municipal activities laid on for the season of tourists and children's outing" (41). If this sentence is a flaunting of authorial power, this power is deflated at the end of the story, when the narrator confronts Drew, and Drew responds to the story: "It's okay, he says, even if its' hardly a subject

for a story [...] He didn't think that someone would weave an elaborate story around it, hadn't imaged himself and Jane as characters in someone's story" (49). The narrator responds: "Well, it's obviously not about you, or the two of you; it's just that I used your project – as one does" (49). The narrator's sheepish admission of using Drew's visual artwork highlights yet again the crucial place of inter-arts relations in this work. While such borrowings can be portrayed as theft, as in the thefts committed by Grace and Drew, they nonetheless stand as the essential and enabling intermedial bridges that allow writing to take place after it has faced its possible self-deletion.

Although Wicomb's artisanal turn involves a blurring of the boundaries between visuality and text, this turn does not signal yet a further step into postmodern aesthetics of open-ended free play. There is, on the contrary, a return to modernism in Wicomb's recent stories to the extent that they partially valorize the boundedness of texts and art objects, what we might call their right to be framed. It is not that Wicomb has forgotten or renounced Derrida's deconstruction of the work's frame, his insistence that the relationship between the text and its surroundings is unstable and mutually constitutive. But if Wicomb's frequent pointing beyond the bounds of her stories toward visual *parerga* follows Derrida's notion that "the frame fits badly," the stories challenge in other ways the Derridean idea that the act of framing is necessarily violent.⁵⁴ The investment of the characters in the plasticity of various objects, in those objects' separation from surrounding circuits of meaning and exchange, has been outlined above. Meanwhile, although the flow of characters across different stories could be taken as a form of postmodern play, it serves just as well to highlight the extent to which the stories are indeed to a significant extent framed and bounded works. Additionally, Wicomb's prose

style delivers sculpted, crafted sentences that call attention to the materiality of their language, particularly her frequent beginning of sentences with the construction “It is the...,” a kind of emphatic deixis that insists on the author’s ability to direct the reader’s attention. Rather than positing framing as violence, all of these choices suggest instead a certain defense of the text against the violence of poststructuralist undermining. Despite this, *The One That Got Away* is receiving a scholarly reception that continues to read it through a standard postmodern lens. One representative example cites the collection’s “playful postmodern techniques,” “multiplicity of narratives,” “interrogation of the totalising nature of narrative into her stories,” and “potentially endless possibilities of representation and interpretation.”⁵⁵ While all of these qualities can certainly be found in the stories, the repetition of these postmodern commonplaces obscure Wicomb’s countervailing commitment to art objects in their particularity.

To read Wicomb, or Adichie, for their interest in solid objects is in one sense to identify modernist aesthetics in work that otherwise appears postmodernist or realist.⁵⁶ This is not, however, simply a formalist gesture. On the contrary, to consider the text, the artwork, or the material book in its materiality, whether that is figured as framedness or even opacity, is to fully consider the labor that went into its creation and thus the agency of its maker. That creative agency is an ethically and politically salient question with regard to African art’s contribution to global modernism has been a central tenet of this dissertation. The turn in twenty-first century African fiction heralded by Wicomb and Adichie is artisanal, as well as artistic, in part because there is an element of modesty in its treatment of language as material for craft, and of literary craft as interdependent with other kinds of creation. At the same time, however, this turn implies a reassertion of the

power of writers to engage in representation and creation without excessive self-doubt. Despite their stylistic, dispositional, and geographic differences, Adichie and Wicomb now both practice fiction in a way that insists on writing as fundamentally an act of making.

Because of her poststructuralist affiliations, Wicomb has been seen as part of the postmodern move from the work to the text. *The One That Got Away*, however, signals a move from work to text and back to work again, both in the sense of a partial re-embrace of a modernist approach to the art object and in the sense of work as artisanal craft. Adichie, from a realist perspective, uses art and craft to draw our attention to the artisanal and material elements of writing in a similar way. It is appropriate that twenty-first century writing about African art brings us back to the artisanal, and that it does so by blurring the lines between craft and “high” art. This dissertation began with D.H. Lawrence’s distinction between the artifact and the art object, but looking at writing about African art across twentieth-century literature teaches us that this division is misleading. Looking across the boundaries of word and image, Europe and Africa, has revealed the degree to which Africa, through both art and literature, made modernism in the twentieth century. Wicomb and Adichie demonstrate that this act of making continues in the twenty-first century.

¹ Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, “Peripheral Realisms Now,” *MLQ* 73.3 (September 2012): 269-288, 271.

² *Ibid.*, 284-285.

³ These questions of the politics of representation are now receiving a lively airing in the world of social media, particularly in the wake of the “Invisible Children” charity’s

Joseph Kony 2012 campaign and the critical response that greeted it. Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole wrote a widely disseminated seven-tweet essay on his Twitter account entitled “Seven Thoughts on the Banality of Sentimentality,” criticizing the Kony campaign as an example of what he calls the “white savior industrial complex.” (Cole’s tweets are compiled, with elaboration, in his article “The White Savior Industrial Complex” on *The Atlantic*’s web site,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>). The campaign’s representation of Africa was also critiqued on the blog *Africa Is A Country*, which describes its mission thus: “The media blog that is not about famine, Bono, or Barack Obama.” The ironic title of the blog, *Africa Is a Country*, acknowledges the re-hashed images of ‘Africa’, undermines those notions, and re-inscribes the image and narrative bank that ‘Africa’ evokes” (<http://africasacountry.com>).

⁴ Wainaina writes, “In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. ... Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book” (“How to Write about Africa,” *Granta* 92 (2005): 92-95, 92).

⁵ John Ryle, “Introduction: The Many Voices of Africa,” *Granta* 92 (2005): 9-15, 10, 12.

⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” online lecture: http://www.ted.com/talk/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Half of a Yellow Sun* Official Web Site. The review section of the web site is available here: <http://www.halfofayellowsun.com/content.php?page=reviews&n=3&f=2>. I indicate the source of promotional quotations in text; they are presented as they are on the web site rather than in their original contexts since I am interested mainly in how the site deploys these quotations.

⁹ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006). Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ Zoë Wicomb, *David’s Story* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2000), 201.

¹² Brenda Cooper, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language* (Rochester and Scottsville, South Africa: James Currey and University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), 150.

¹³ *Half of a Yellow Sun* Official Web Site.

¹⁴ Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 46.

¹⁵ Ibid, 46.

¹⁶ Walkowitz argues that “Born-translated novels are designed to travel, so they tend to veer away from the modernist emphasis on linguistic experimentation,” Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Comparison Literature,” *NLH* 40 (2009): 567-582, 570.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 161.

¹⁸ Ibid, 158, 159.

¹⁹ See Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork: Medium to Context to Object to Art* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 2011) and Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁰ Eileen Julien, "The Extroverted African Novel," in *The Novel, Vol. 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 667-700, 681.

²¹ Ibid, 695-696.

²² Richard's fascination with Igbo art aligns him with a character in one of *Sun's* important intertexts, the British officer Alan Grey in Buchi Emecheta's novel *Destination Biafra* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1982). Unlike Richard, whose curiosity gradually leads him toward what Adichie presents as an increasingly ethical relation to Igbo culture, Grey's interest in collecting is portrayed as an example of unreconstructed primitivism and becomes, in one of the novel's most memorably cynical moments, the pretext for making a covert intelligence mission on behalf of British interests. Emecheta compounds the irony by suggesting that the British represent Igbo art's only hope of being preserved in the face of hostility toward it from Igbo Christians. Emecheta's suggestion that Igbo society in the Biafran War-era dismissed its artistic heritage is, however, misleading: there was in fact a renewed interest in Igbo artistic traditions as part of an interest in cultural recovery in the wake of Biafra's defeat (see Toyin Falola and Roy Doron, "Simon Ottenberg: An Introduction," in *Igbo Art and Culture and other Essays by Simon Ottenberg*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc, 2006), 5.

²³ Adichie's recounting of the discovery is historically accurate; see Thurstan Shaw, *Unearthing Igbo-Ukwu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

²⁴ See Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211-262.

²⁵ Cooper, 133-134.

²⁶ Cooper, 133.

²⁷ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 28.

²⁸ G.D. Killam, "Achebe on Editing," in *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 124-129, 126.

²⁹ Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."

³⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (New York: Anchor Books 2009). Further citations will be provided parenthetically in the text.

³¹ In the African-American context, the act of recovering non-textual creative production has been influentially addressed by Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983).

³² Bewes, 187.

³³ Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 171.

³⁴ Susan Z. Andrade, "Introduction," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 42.2 (2009): 189-199, 189, 192.

³⁵ Susan Z. Andrade, "Representing Slums and Home: Chris Abani's *GraceLand*," in *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. David

James (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 225-242, 228, 239.

³⁶ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

³⁷ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (Oxford: James Currey and Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 153-156.

³⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate," *MLQ* 73.3 (September 2012): 475-485, 476, 479.

³⁹ Chinua Achebe, "Thoughts on the African Novel," *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 91-99, 92.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴¹ The images featured are from the Tatham Art Gallery's web site, www.tatham.org.za/chickenman-mkhize-edendale-excels.html. See also the archives at the AHRC Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory, and History at the University of Leeds: www.leeds.ac.uk/cath/ahrc/events/2006/0111/abs/mkhize.html.

⁴² Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2000). Citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴³ Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), 15, 16, 17.

⁴⁴ Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 125.

⁴⁵ Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* (New York and London: The New Press, 2006), 86. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁶ Wicomb, *The One That Got Away* (New York and London: The New Press, 2008). Citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁷ As Virginia Richter writes in her examination of Derridean hauntology in *David's Story* and *The One That Got Away*, "The specters [in *TOTGA*] appear to be friendlier," "Zoë Wicomb's Ghosts: Uncanny Translocations in *David's Story* and *The One That Got Away*," *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 12:3-4 (2011): 373-388, 382.

⁴⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 152. This is discussed more fully in Chapter One of this dissertation.

⁴⁹ Julike Griem, in an essay on Wicomb's use of repetition, argues that this "ekphrastic meditation exposes an exemplary transition from colonial to postcolonial repetition brought about by her stubborn capacity to return, to revise, to gaze back at the fountain until the monument yields those moments of irregularity and difference that its symmetrical layout is meant to smooth over." Griem, "The trick lies in repetitions': The Politics of Genre in Zoë Wicomb's *The One That Got Away*," *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 12:3-4 (2011): 389-406, 396.

⁵⁰ Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 41. See also Gavin Younge, *Art of the South African Townships* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), Annie E. Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), and John Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁵¹ Kasfir and Wicomb are questioning “transitional art” as a label and a mode of reception. Neither they nor I am criticizing any artists whose work falls under this heading.

⁵² Zoë Wicomb, “Culture Beyond Color?” *Transition* 60 (1993): 27-32, 29.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 69.

⁵⁵ Fiona McCann, “Broadening and Narrowing Horizons in Zoë Wicomb’s *The One That Got Away*,” *Commonwealth* 33.1 (2010): 55-66. First quotation 56, all others 65.

⁵⁶ Michael Fried’s distinction between art and objecthood in Western visual art is of some use here in that it allows us to differentiate between a modernist art that insists on itself as a work of art and a postmodern (minimalist or literalist, in Fried’s language) that exists as simply an object. Of course, this distinction does not apply to sub-Saharan African art traditions, and I do not elsewhere use the word “object” in Fried’s sense. See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Criticism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998).

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